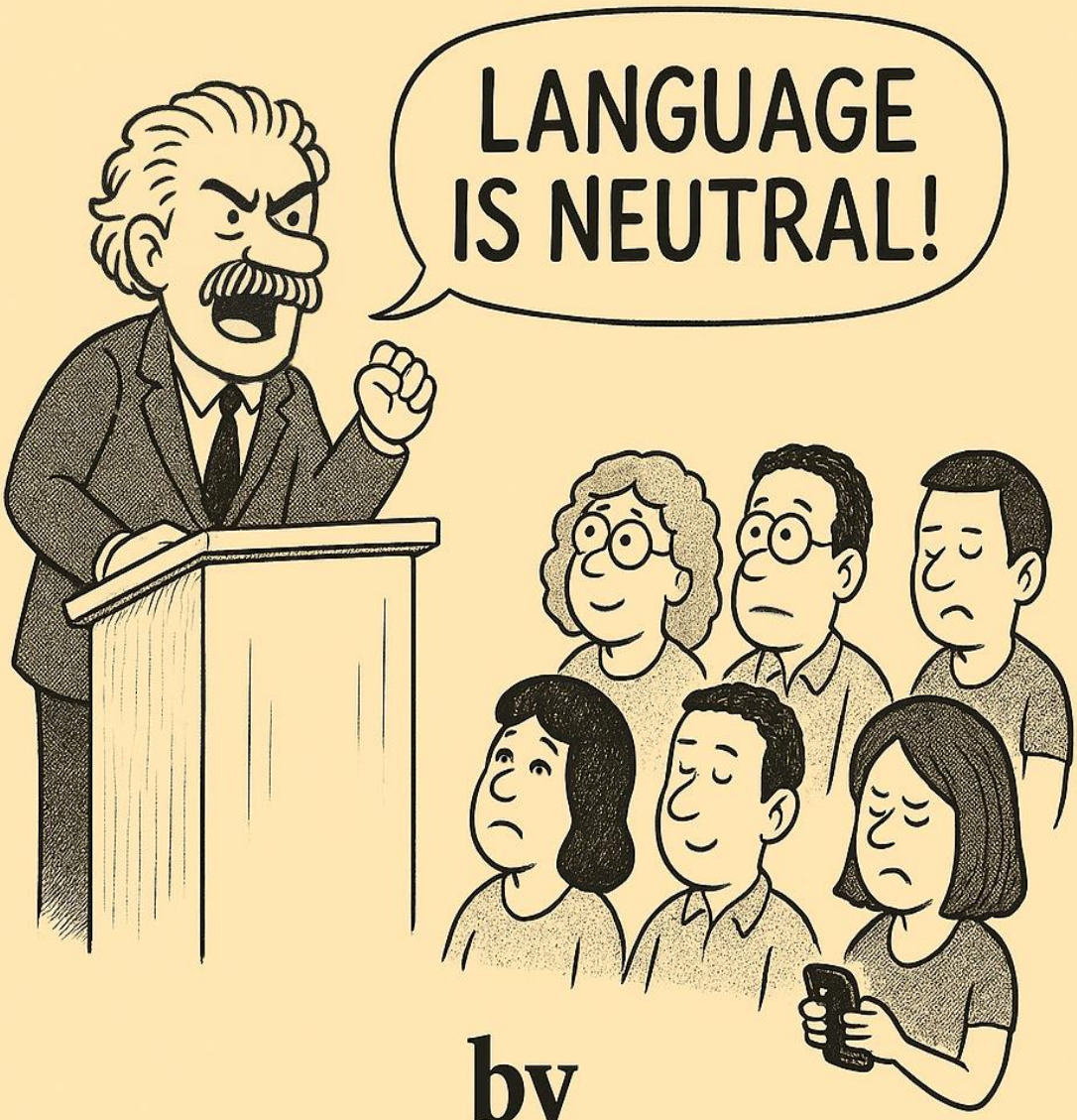
THE PERVERSE LANGUAGE



by

Peter Ayolov

THE MISCOMMUNICATION TRILOGY
"The Conspiracy of Speech, Vol. I."
Fourth part

THE PERVERSE LANGUAGE

by Peter Ayolov

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SAMIZDAT
3, Rossini Str. Plovdiv, 4000 Bulgaria

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1. Preface: MISCOMMUNICATION

"The mouth of the righteous person brings forth wise words, but the tongue of the perverse will be silenced. The lips of the righteous speak what is acceptable, but the mouth of the wicked speaks what is perverse".
Proverbs 10:31-32

1.1. Mass miscommunication

(When everyone speaks: Broadcasting noise, losing meaning)

'Communication fails not in spite of language, but because of it'.

— Niklas Luhmann, Social Systems

'Misunderstanding is not the failure of communication—it is its fundamental mode'.

— John Durham Peters, Speaking into the Air

The Babel effect

Miscommunication is typically understood as a breakdown in the transmission of meaning between speaker and listener. One speaks poorly, the other listens badly, and clarity is lost somewhere in the middle. Yet this definition, framed in purely functional terms, masks a more profound implication. Language is not simply a conduit of facts or intentions—it is the bond that makes society possible. When communication fails, what collapses is not just understanding but communion: the shared symbolic world that allows individuals to relate as members of a family, a community, or a society. The prefix 'mis' implies more than mistake; it carries connotations of harm, deviation, and corruption. Miscommunication, then, is not merely faulty expression. It is corrupted communion. It is a breakdown of symbolic order in mass society. At its deepest level, it marks the disintegration of trust, the shattering of shared reality, and the erosion of symbolic coherence. It signals an illness in the social fabric, a breakdown of the ethical and emotional alignment necessary for communal life. This becomes particularly acute in large groups. As the number of participants in a communicative field grows, the distance between individuals increases. Personal relationships weaken, shared references dissolve, and the precision of communication gives way to generalisation. In smaller groups—families, tribes, close communities—language is sustained by intimacy and context. People speak to those they know, about things they understand together. But in larger societies, that common ground vanishes. Most information is taken on faith, accepted not because of understanding but because of trust in the source—or belief in its authority. When that trust erodes, language no longer serves as communion. It becomes either a weapon or a void. In mass society, language is easily distorted. The multiplication of voices does not automatically produce clarity. Instead, it creates noise. The speaker must appeal to abstract categories—'the people', 'the market', 'the nation'—rather than to named individuals. The listener, in turn, interprets from within their own social, ideological, or emotional bubble. The shared symbolic universe disintegrates into private worlds. Miscommunication here is not incidental—it is systemic. It arises because the structure of mass society favours detachment over connection,

performance over dialogue. Sociologically, this resembles what Emile Durkheim called anomie: a state in which social norms break down and individuals become unmoored from communal meaning. The result is confusion, suspicion, and alienation. In such a landscape, language becomes a terrain of conflict rather than communion. Miscommunication grows in the space where no shared assumptions remain. Each utterance becomes ambiguous, each gesture suspect. The other is no longer a person to understand, but a code to decode—or a threat to avoid. This is compounded by the nature of public discourse in modernity. In large-scale communication—political speech, mass media, digital platforms—language loses its dialogical quality. It becomes declarative, repetitive, strategic. Truth becomes secondary to persuasion; meaning becomes subordinate to engagement. The rise of jargon, euphemism, slogan, and doublespeak reflects this shift. These forms do not aim at mutual understanding but at signal transmission. They are designed to be received, not responded to. Thus, communication no longer constitutes community. It mimics it. Philosopher Jean Baudrillard warned of the replacement of meaning by simulation in such societies. Miscommunication in this context is not a bug but a feature. It sustains systems in which symbolic exchange is hollowed out. Language becomes pure appearance—statements without commitments, questions without listeners, signs without referents. In such an environment, people speak more but understand less. They hear others' voices, but not their meanings. The symbolic link between words and shared life frays until speech becomes the echo of isolation. Psychologically, this fragmentation manifests in widespread feelings of alienation. Individuals feel unheard, misunderstood, and emotionally disconnected even amid constant communication. This is not merely a personal issue but a structural one. When language is no longer rooted in relationships of care, it becomes abstract. When speech becomes a performance for strangers, rather than a gesture toward connection, it ceases to carry meaning that binds. In extreme cases, miscommunication escalates into distrust and division. Misunderstanding becomes misjudgement; misjudgement becomes antagonism. A society that cannot speak to itself breaks into factions that no longer share even the assumption of good faith. Each group believes it is being misrepresented or ignored by the others. Dialogue gives way to monologue. Words cease to bridge and begin to divide. To address miscommunication, then, is not merely a matter of clearer language or better education. It requires a reweaving of the social and symbolic fabric—an effort to restore the conditions under which language can again function as communion. This means rebuilding trust, cultivating attention, and fostering environments where people speak not only to be heard but to be understood. Without such efforts, large societies risk becoming crowds: assemblies without connection, networks without meaning.

Why we lie more easily in groups

People often think of teamwork as a path to shared success, but when it comes to honesty, teams can have the opposite effect. A recent study[1] 'Why We Lie More Easily in Teams' from Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich shows that people lie more frequently in group settings than when acting alone. Conducted by behavioural economists and published in 'Management Science', the study sheds light on how group dynamics can undermine personal ethics, especially in organisational and institutional contexts. In the experiment, 273 participants watched a die roll on video and then had to report the result. The higher the number they claimed, the more money they received. The catch was that the actual roll was private, so lying was easy and tempting. When people made decisions individually, about 61.5% lied. But when they discussed and voted on the result in anonymous group chats, the number of liars rose

[1] Hoch, J.E. and Kocer, M. (2023) Why We Lie More Easily in Teams. Management Science.

to 86.3%. As Martin Kocer, one of the researchers, noted, people are significantly less honest when they decide together. Why does this happen? In teams, individuals often shift responsibility. Instead of feeling personally accountable, they defer to group consensus. This diffusion of responsibility can create a sense that 'everyone is doing it', making unethical actions seem less blameworthy. Even those who would normally act honestly tend to go along with the group. Professor Julia E. Hoch from California State University Northridge points out that peer pressure plays a major role. If a team leans toward dishonesty, others feel pressure to conform, especially when group members reinterpret norms and values together. This kind of social drift has real consequences. Group dishonesty can scale up into widespread organisational misconduct. Historical events provide extreme examples, such as how entire populations became complicit in state-led violence or discrimination. On a more everyday level, the same logic helps explain why corporate scandals often involve many people—not just a single bad actor. The more a team's behaviour deviates from ethical standards, the more difficult it becomes for individuals to resist. In companies, this makes leadership and communication crucial. Without strong ethical norms, group decision-making can easily slide into collective dishonesty. The researchers recommend implementing and maintaining a strict code of conduct. Ethical standards should not be abstract statements, but regularly reinforced practices. Monitoring group interactions and encouraging dissent or whistleblowing are essential tools to prevent the erosion of honesty. The problem becomes worse in large or hierarchical teams. In such environments, authority figures can either reinforce ethical behaviour or indirectly encourage deception. If leaders turn a blind eye or set poor examples, those beneath them often follow. In the case of the Enron scandal, for instance, many employees suspected wrongdoing but did not speak up because of the company's internal culture and pressure from above. The study also resonates with broader research on communication challenges in virtual teams. Professor Hoch notes that in remote environments, where people interact mostly through email or video calls, ethical behaviour depends heavily on clear leadership and defined goals. Without physical presence, informal checks on behaviour are weaker, and team members may lose sight of shared values. Transparency and regular feedback become more important when social cues are limited. In the end, the findings point to a simple but troubling truth: group membership can make people more likely to abandon their principles. Left unchecked, team settings encourage a gradual redefinition of what counts as acceptable behaviour. What begins as a one-time compromise can quickly become the new norm. Organisations need to recognise this risk and take active steps to preserve individual accountability even in collective settings. As Kocer puts it, the path to ethical failure often starts not with bad people, but with good people in the wrong group context. In such situations, it is not individual conscience that guides action, but the group's shifting standards that determine what is considered right or wrong. Lying, in this sense, is an expected social activity.

Repairing trust

Restoring trust after a transgression is not a simple matter, and the dynamics shift depending on whether one is dealing with an individual or a group. In the study 'Repairing trust with individuals vs. groups[2]' by Peter H. Kim, Cecily D. Cooper, Kurt T. Dirks, and Donald L. Ferrin, the authors explore how trust repair processes differ between these two contexts. Their

[2] Kim, P.H., Cooper, C.D., Dirks, K.T. and Ferrin, D.L. (2013). Repairing trust with individuals vs. groups. Organizational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes, 120(1), pp.1–14. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2012.08.004.

findings suggest that groups present more resistance to trust restoration than individuals, particularly when responses to violations do not align with the type of harm caused. Two types of violations are key to understanding this: competence-based and integrity-based. A competence-based violation occurs when someone fails due to a lack of skill or ability, while an integrity-based violation involves dishonesty or unethical behaviour. The study finds that if the transgressor denies responsibility for a competence-based failure, trust declines. Similarly, if someone apologises for an integrity-based breach, it can backfire. In both cases, the mismatch between the nature of the violation and the kind of response undermines the credibility of the repair effort. Groups, the researchers note, are more sensitive to these mismatches. When individuals assess trust violations alone, their judgments are more likely to be shaped by personal interpretation and emotional response. But when the same people enter a group setting, their views are exposed to reinforcement, challenge, and amplification. Shared opinions in the group can escalate negative assessments, making trust harder to restore. People are often swayed not just by the arguments they hear, but by the perception of what others in the group believe. Once a dominant opinion forms, dissent becomes less likely, and the group's stance tends to harden. The study also observes that the order in which evaluations occur matters. If individuals form their views before entering a group discussion, their opinions are more flexible. But once a group judgment is formed, it becomes a strong reference point for individuals. This anchoring effect means that group decisions tend to dominate later individual assessments, whereas individual views may still shift in group settings. One of the most revealing insights is the role of persuasive argumentation. It is not just the content of what is said that matters, but how effectively it resonates with shared group values. Normative pressure—trying to conform to what seems expected—is less effective than a compelling explanation that directly addresses the concerns raised by the violation. Successful trust repair depends on presenting a narrative that aligns clearly with the nature of the broken trust and that can withstand group scrutiny. The implications for organisations and leaders are significant. Misjudging the type of violation and responding inappropriately can deepen mistrust, especially when responses are perceived as generic or strategic. Efforts to repair trust should be tailored, deliberate, and grounded in an understanding of group psychology. Addressing individuals with sincerity and logic may work in one-on-one contexts, but repairing trust with groups requires anticipating how discussions will evolve and how opinions might converge or polarise.

Groups are less trusting than individuals

In many social and economic settings, trust is essential. Whether people interact in families, businesses, or governments, the ability to rely on others under conditions of uncertainty shapes relationships and decisions. Most previous research on trust focuses on individuals, yet many decisions in real life are made by groups. A study 'Trust between individuals and groups[3]' by Tamar Kugler and colleagues explores how groups behave differently from individuals in situations that require trust and trustworthiness, using a controlled experiment to highlight these differences. The researchers used a two-person trust game to test their ideas. In this game, a sender receives a sum of money and chooses how much to send to a responder. The amount sent is tripled, and the responder then decides how much to return to the sender. The experiment followed a two by two structure: both roles (sender and responder) were filled either by individuals or groups of three. Each group had to come to a

[3] Kugler, T., Bornstein, G., Kocher, M.G. and Sutter, M. (2007) 'Trust between individuals and groups: Groups are less trusting than individuals but just as trustworthy', Journal of Economic Psychology, 28(6), pp. 646–657.

joint decision, simulating the way real-life teams make choices. Results showed a clear difference in the level of trust between individuals and groups. Individuals in the sender role sent larger portions of the money to the responder than groups did. Groups were not only more cautious but also more likely to send nothing at all—especially when the responder was another group. This suggests that groups are more risk-averse and less willing to assume that the other party will reciprocate. In contrast, individuals appeared more comfortable placing their faith in the game's process and in the assumed goodwill of others. However, the study revealed that when it came to returning money—as responders—groups behaved similarly to individuals. That is, once they received the tripled amount, groups returned a comparable fraction to the sender. This consistency suggests that while groups may hesitate to trust, they are not less trustworthy. Their caution does not reflect a lower ethical standard, only a different approach to taking risks. In short, groups and individuals are equally reliable when acting in the role of the responder. The researchers also considered how groups and individuals behaved in asymmetric pairings—for example, a group sending to an individual or vice versa. The same trends held: groups acted more cautiously when they had to trust, but their reliability in returning funds was consistent with individual behaviour. These results suggest that group dynamics make people more conservative when initiating trust but do not alter their sense of fairness or reciprocity. This has important implications for how organisations and societies function. In real-world settings, many decisions are not made by isolated individuals but by committees, boards, or work teams. Understanding that groups tend to be less trusting—but not less trustworthy—can help in designing institutional frameworks that account for group psychology. It may also explain why negotiations or collaborative projects often take longer and require more formal guarantees when multiple stakeholders are involved. The study challenges the assumption that caution or reluctance to trust implies a lack of goodwill. Instead, it shows that trust and trustworthiness are distinct. One can be generous and reliable while still being slow to take a risk. Recognising this distinction can lead to more productive interactions, especially in situations where trust must be built across group boundaries. The study by Kugler, Bornstein, Kocher, and Sutter thus offers a nuanced picture of how trust functions in group settings. It shows that while groups are more hesitant to extend trust, they are no less dependable in honouring it once given. This difference may stem from the need for consensus in groups or the psychological effects of shared responsibility, but the outcome is clear: groups are more cautious, not more selfish.

Trusting groups

In his article 'Trusting Groups[4]', Matthew Bennett examines the idea that people can genuinely trust groups, not just rely on them. He challenges the scepticism raised by Katherine Hawley, who argues that groups cannot be proper objects of trust because they lack personal agency. According to Hawley, trusting a group is fundamentally different from trusting an individual, and what often passes as group trust is better described as reliance. Bennett engages with this critique and argues that a more nuanced understanding can preserve the concept of group trust. Bennett begins by explaining the debate. Many social science studies measure trust in institutions like governments, corporations, or media organisations. But if Hawley is right, and group trust is a mistake, then those studies might be misreading what they observe. Hawley draws a sharp line between trust and reliance. For individuals, trust implies a commitment and a willingness to take responsibility. When someone makes a promise or gives information, trust means accepting that the person stands behind their words. Groups, however, work differently.

[4] Bennett, M. (2021) 'Trusting groups', Philosophical Studies, 178(10), pp. 3199–3219.

Their statements emerge from internal processes, committees, and hierarchies. Because no single person takes responsibility for the group's words, it is unclear whether those words can be trusted in the same sense. Hawley also questions whether groups can be targets of emotional responses—what philosophers call reactive attitudes. When individuals lie, they can be blamed or resented. But when a group fails, our reaction is often directed at the institution, not as a person, but as a faceless structure. Although people express anger toward corporations or governments, this emotional response lacks the personal quality that makes interpersonal trust meaningful. As a result, she claims, groups cannot be true bearers of trust or distrust. Bennett disagrees. He proposes an alternative account of trust, based on commitment rather than emotion. Trust, in this view, means believing that someone—or some group—has made a commitment to act in a certain way. This commitment-based model allows trust to apply to both individuals and collectives. For example, if a university pledges to uphold academic freedom, people can trust it—not because they feel warm emotions toward it, but because they believe it is committed to that principle. He extends this idea to distinguish trust from mere reliance. One may rely on a machine or an algorithm to perform a task, but trust involves a belief in the actor's underlying motivations. In the case of groups, people trust when they believe the group can form intentions and following through. A government might be seen as trustworthy if it consistently acts according to stated values, even if its actions are not perfect. This distinction matters. It explains why people express loyalty to institutions, and why the collapse of that trust can feel like betrayal. When citizens say they trust a political party, they mean more than that it produces favourable outcomes. They are aligning themselves with the group's declared commitments and values. Bennett argues that this deeper view of group trust supports the validity of tools like the Trust in Government index. These measurements are not just about competence but reflect judgments about whether institutions are seen as committed to the public good. By preserving the concept of trust, we gain insight into how people relate to collective entities—not as machines, but as actors whose motives and values matter. In sum, Bennett defends the idea that trust in groups is possible and meaningful. By focusing on the idea of commitment rather than emotion, he offers a model that explains how trust can operate even when personal responsibility is spread across many people. This approach helps clarify why trust in institutions remains central to social life, and why distinguishing trust from reliance is more than a semantic exercise—it is essential to understanding how society holds itself together.

Groups lie more than individuals

In their study[5] 'Do groups lie more than individuals? Honesty and deception as a function of strategic self-interest', Taya R. Cohen and her colleagues set out to answer a troubling question: are groups more likely to lie than individuals? Their research, rooted in behavioural experiments, reveals a nuanced answer. It turns out that groups do lie more than individuals, but only when lying clearly serves their economic interests. When truthfulness can be strategically useful, groups tend to lie less. This suggests that groups are not inherently less honest than individuals, but they are more calculated in their behaviour. The researchers begin by pointing to earlier studies showing that groups behave in more self-interested ways than individuals. In various decision-making games, groups have been found to be more competitive, more aggressive, and more inclined to maximise outcomes for themselves. This background

[5] Cohen, T.R., Gunia, B.C., Kim-Jun, S.Y. and Murnighan, J.K. (2009) 'Do groups lie more than individuals? Honesty and deception as a function of strategic self-interest', Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 45(6), pp. 1321–1324.

raises the question of whether such strategic tendencies might also make groups more prone to dishonesty. But unlike aggression or negotiation tactics, deception had not been as thoroughly studied in this context. Cohen and her team introduce two main forces behind dishonest behaviour in groups: fear and greed. Fear drives defensive deception—lying to avoid loss or harm—while greed motivates offensive deception—lying to gain something. In intergroup contexts, both forces are heightened. People feel less personal responsibility when acting as part of a group, and they are more likely to act in ways that maximise collective gain, even at the cost of ethical considerations. To test their theory, the researchers divided participants into groups or assigned to act individually in a controlled experiment. Each participant or group had the chance to lie or tell the truth in a scenario that involved financial outcomes. The experiment manipulated whether the consequences of lying were certain or uncertain. This allowed the researchers to see whether people would behave differently when the risks and benefits of deception were clearer. The findings were revealing. When the benefits of lying were guaranteed, 82% of groups chose to deceive, compared to just 48% of individuals. But when the outcomes were uncertain, groups were more cautious and lied less often than individuals. This supports the idea that groups are not just more dishonest—they are more strategic. They make decisions based not on emotional reactions or personal values, but on calculated judgments about what will bring the best results. The study has broader implications. In public life, many of the most damaging scandals—corporate frauds, political cover-ups, institutional failures—are the result of group decisions. This research helps explain why that happens. Groups are more likely to engage in calculated deception when they believe it will bring collective rewards. But they are also capable of restraint when honesty serves their long-term interests. The behaviour of groups in moral dilemmas is shaped less by principles than by incentives. Understanding this difference helps explain why individuals may act one way on their own, and another when embedded in a collective. It also highlights the importance of building structures and incentives that reward transparency at the group level. Groups are not inherently dishonest—but they are rational, and sometimes, that can make all the difference. Rationality alone does not guarantee honesty, morality, or justice, for a group can act with perfect logic in pursuit of profoundly unethical ends.

Evolution of systematic lying

Language did not evolve merely to transmit facts. It emerged as the basis of sociability, enabling humans to form communities and navigate complex social environments. Beyond conveying truth, language also made deception possible. The capacity to lie—far from being a defect—appears deeply embedded in the structure of language itself. In their study 'Do groups lie more than individuals?', Taya R. Cohen and her colleagues explored this function of language in a group setting, asking whether collectives are more prone to deception than individuals. Their findings revealed that groups lie more when deception ensures benefits yet lie less when honesty serves as a strategic advantage. This shows that groups do not lie blindly; they adapt their use of language based on collective goals. The strategic manipulation of language is not a modern invention. It began early in human history as people formed larger and more structured communities. With the rise of social living, words gained power—not only to express but to influence, persuade, and mislead. Lying became part of the social toolkit, useful in negotiations, conflicts, and the construction of alliances. In this evolutionary context, group lying can be understood as a refinement of individual deception. When groups speak, their statements often carry collective intention. This makes group language more calculated and more detached from personal conscience. But the evolution of deception also gave rise to something more constructive: the creation of fictions. As language became capable of organised

lying, it enabled the development of myths, ideologies, and shared beliefs. These collective fictions do not necessarily deceive in harmful ways. They often serve to unite people through common narratives. A story about divine justice or national destiny may not be true, but it fosters solidarity. The same cognitive mechanisms that allow groups to lie in experiments also enable societies to create narratives that bind millions of strangers together. Language, then, developed along two paths: one directed toward truth and cooperation, the other toward manipulation and control. These paths are not opposites but intertwined. Truth and fiction often coexist in the same sentence, and the line between honest expression and persuasive distortion is rarely clear. As groups become larger and more abstract—nations, corporations, churches—their use of language becomes more detached from individual accountability. In this way, language becomes a medium not of shared experience but of mass coordination. This coordination often relies on constructed truths that are believable, repeatable, and useful, regardless of their factual content. The research confirms that when placed in situations demanding choice, groups do not operate as collections of individual moralities. They behave as strategic units. They weigh consequences. They calibrate language to outcomes. In this light, systematic lying is not an aberration of group behaviour—it is a product of social rationality. It reflects the way humans have learnt to use language to navigate cooperation and competition simultaneously. In sum, language is central to the formation of human community, not only because it allows for truth-telling but because it enables shared fictions. These fictions, though rooted in the capacity to deceive, have allowed societies to create meaning, identity, and cohesion at a scale that would be impossible through honest communication alone. Group lying is not simply moral failure; it is also an indicator of how language has evolved to manage the demands of collective life. Organized collective lying represents the pinnacle of language's evolution, a stage known as ideology.

Are people always more dishonest in groups?

The idea that groups lie more than individuals is well-supported in behavioural research. But the picture changes when the harm caused by lying becomes visible and specific. In the study 'Are groups always more dishonest than individuals?[6]' by Geoffrey Castillo, Lawrence Choo, and Veronika Grimm, the authors explore how dishonesty changes when groups know their actions harm a third party, in this case, a local charity. The key question is whether the presence of visible victims makes groups less likely to lie than individuals. Many past experiments use tasks where dishonesty only affects the experimenter, and the cost of lying is abstract. But real-life dishonesty always has victims. In the financial world, the health sector, or aid work, lying affects real people. The researchers created an experiment that made these consequences more concrete. Participants either worked alone or in small groups and reported the results of a virtual die roll. Their payout depended on the number they claimed to see. In the base scenario, exaggerating the number simply meant more money for the participant. But in the charity condition, exaggerating reduced the amount of money going to a local nonprofit. The results were surprising. In the base condition, groups lied more than individuals, echoing previous findings. But when lying hurt the charity, groups were no more dishonest than individuals—and in some cases, they lied less. Group chats revealed fewer suggestions to lie in the charity condition, and honest participants had more influence. This suggests that when harm is visible, moral concerns become more prominent in group discussions. Another finding showed that dishonesty spreads. People in dishonest groups were more likely to behave

[6] Castillo, G., Choo, L. and Grimm, V. (2021) 'Are groups always more dishonest than individuals? The case of salient negative externalities', Journal of Economic Behaviour & Organization, 190, pp. 783–797.

dishonestly later. But even here, the presence of a real victim reduced this contagion effect. When the researchers made the harm even more obvious by sending transcripts of group decisions to the charity, the results did not change much. This suggests that the act of discussing decisions in a group, combined with the awareness of real consequences, does more to reduce dishonesty than surveillance or guilt. To assess whether the presence of the charity simply made people more generous, the researchers included a dictator game where people split money with the charity without needing to lie. Here, group and individual behaviour was the same. This implies that the reduction in dishonesty was not because groups became more altruistic. Instead, the visibility of harm directly shaped how they made decisions. The study offers a subtle view of how dishonesty works in social settings. Groups may lie more when the consequences are abstract or distant. But when the damage is made clear and moral accountability enters the conversation, groups can self-regulate. Honesty, in this context, depends not just on individual values but on how the situation is framed and whether the harm caused by lying is visible and shared.

Liar! Liar!

In their article 'Liar! Liar! Your Pants Are on Fire: Deceptive Communication in the Workplace[7]', Julie Indvik and Pamela R. Johnson examine the widespread role of deception in professional settings. They argue that lying, from harmless white lies to serious fraud, is not an exception in the workplace but a regular part of daily interactions. Whether it is to gain an edge, protect one's image, or avoid consequences, deception often becomes a survival strategy in competitive and impersonal work environments. Despite early lessons that truthfulness is a virtue, many people grow into professional roles where deception becomes normalised and even expected. The financial impact of workplace dishonesty is substantial. In the United States alone, estimates range from \$6 billion to as much as \$200 billion lost annually due to deceptive practices. These costs include everything from inflated expense reports to large-scale accounting fraud. But the damage is not just economic. Trust, once broken, is hard to rebuild. When deception becomes routine, it corrodes the relationships and communication structures on which businesses depend. Indvik and Johnson also place workplace lying in a broader historical and cultural context. People have always lied, and societies have long sought ways to uncover deception. Ancient trials by ordeal, outdated theories like phrenology, and modern tools like polygraphs or AI deception detectors all reflect this persistent concern. Yet scientific research shows that humans are poor lie detectors. Common beliefs—like reading eye movements or facial expressions—often fail. Even experienced professionals struggle to reliably identify deception, performing only slightly better than chance. According to the authors, a lie is any message designed to deliberately mislead. People lie for many reasons—fear of failure, social pressure, habit, or to gain rewards. The modern workplace often rewards polished presentation over raw honesty. Employees are taught to frame mistakes in positive language, spin achievements, and navigate office politics with tactful exaggerations. These habits can evolve into deeper dishonesty when people feel trapped in unrealistic expectations. The longer these falsehoods go unchecked, the more damage they can cause to a person's reputation or a company's credibility. Despite how common lying is, most people remain uncomfortable with the idea of being deceptive. Studies cited in the article show that individuals lie in about one in five extended conversations. Interestingly, people underestimate how often they lie, or how often they are lied to. Over time, keeping track of what was said, who was

[7] Indvik, J. and Johnson, P.R. (2009) 'Liar! Liar! Your Pants Are on Fire: Deceptive Communication in the Workplace', Academy of Management Perspectives, 23(4), pp. 84–86.

misled, and what version of the story was shared becomes exhausting. Mistakes slip through, and reputations suffer. The article also offers guidance to managers. One key idea is that leaders shape the ethical tone of a workplace. When perfection is demanded and mistakes are punished harshly, employees are more likely to lie to cover up errors. In contrast, work cultures that accept occasional failure and reward transparency can reduce the pressure to deceive. Managers who model honest behaviour and provide psychological safety foster a more trustworthy environment. Indvik and Johnson's work shows that deception is both a tool and a threat. It can help smooth social interactions or secure short-term wins. But over time, its costs—broken trust, damaged relationships, and financial loss—outweigh the benefits. Understanding why people lie and creating work cultures that reduce the need to lie, is essential to building healthier and more effective organisations.

Partial lying and social image concern

In their study 'Groups versus individuals, partial lying, and social image concern in a dice-rolling experiment[8]', Yoshitaka Okano and Eiji Goto examine how lying behaviour differs between individuals and groups of close friends. Using a dice-rolling experiment, they focus not just on whether people lie, but how much and why. Both individuals and groups lie, but groups tend to lie partially rather than going to the extreme. Interestingly, groups also show more concern about how their actions are perceived, especially by those they know. The experiment involved a simple setup. Participants rolled a six-sided die in private and reported the result. Their pay depended on the number they reported—higher numbers meant more money, except for six, which yielded nothing. In the group condition, two friends had to agree on the reported number. Before rolling, they filled out a questionnaire about their friendship, creating a setting that mirrors real-life situations where decisions happen within familiar relationships. The researchers proposed three outcomes. One was that groups would go straight for the highest reward, lying boldly because they could share responsibility. Another was those groups, out of concern for social image, would lie moderately—choosing a number that still increased their reward but did not seem obviously dishonest. The third option was that a friend might act as a moral check, encouraging the group to tell the truth. What they found was telling. Groups did lie, but not to the fullest extent. Instead of always picking the highest paying number, they often chose a middle value—one that brought some benefit without being too obvious. The number three came up far more often than chance would predict. This form of partial lying allowed group members to balance the desire for money with the need to appear honest to each other. To explain this behaviour, Okano and Goto turned to two theoretical models. The first, by Dufwenberg and Dufwenberg, looked at how people react to the size of a lie. But this model did not match the experimental data well, especially for groups. The second, by Khalmetski and Sliwka, added a layer about social image—how bad it feels to be seen as a liar. This model worked much better. It showed that groups were more sensitive to being perceived as dishonest and felt less internal cost for lying, likely because they shared the blame. These findings matter because many real-world decisions happen in group settings, often between people who know each other. The study suggests that in such cases, people do not simply chase the biggest gain. Instead, they weigh self-interest against social consequences. Being caught in a lie among friends is not just risky, it is embarrassing. So, people lie in a way that lets them feel clever without losing face. Okano and Goto's research shows that deception in groups is nuanced. It is not just a strategy for personal gain—it is also a way to maintain

[8] Okano, Y. and Goto, E. (2021) 'Groups versus individuals, partial lying, and social image concern in a dice-rolling experiment', Journal of Economic Behaviour & Organization, 188, pp. 624–635.

harmony and manage social bonds. Their work adds to the growing understanding that dishonesty is shaped not only by what people want but also by how they wish to be perceived.

Miscommunication during collaborative action

In the study 'Predictions of Miscommunication in Verbal Communication During Collaborative Joint Action[9]' by Alexandra Paxton, Jennifer M. Roche, Alyssa Ibarra, and Michael K. Tanenhaus, researchers explored the subtle ways verbal communication can break down during collaborative tasks. Their aim was to identify what aspects of language use—especially lexical choices and pragmatic cues—predict whether a message will be successfully understood or lead to miscommunication. The experiment involved pairs of participants working together to build three-dimensional puzzles. They had to rely solely on spoken language, without any shared visual reference. This setup created a controlled environment where every misunderstanding could be traced back to the structure and content of spoken turns. The researchers analysed the conversations by marking features such as the ratio of content words (lexical density), the use of spatial terms, affirmations like 'yes', moments where participants confirmed each other's statements (grounding), and whether a turn was answering a question. Their findings showed that successful exchanges often had higher lexical density, featured affirmation, and included grounding behaviour. These cues helped maintain a shared understanding. On the other hand, miscommunication frequently occurred when speakers used spatial terms without clearly confirming what those terms meant to their partner. Answers to questions, too, often resulted in brief, less informative responses, which sometimes contributed to confusion. Though the use of negation was suspected to play a role in communication breakdowns, the data did not consistently support this. In some cases, short responses like 'uh-huh' or 'yes' created trouble. While such responses might be meant as simple acknowledgements, they could easily be mistaken for full agreement or understanding. This led to misalignment, where one speaker thought they had been understood, while the other had not yet grasped the meaning. When communication failed, follow-up turns tended to contain fewer content words, as if the speakers were simplifying rather than clarifying. The balance between saying enough and saying too much was delicate. Further analysis found that participants often adjusted their speech when they sensed miscommunication, though not always successfully. Grounding attempts during questions led to less content-rich speech, due to the effort to respond quickly or the challenge of clarifying meaning without visual support. Even when speakers tried to be efficient, skipping too much detail made it harder for their partner to follow along. This research highlights how common and natural miscommunication is, especially in situations where people cannot rely on visual cues or shared physical context. The effort to keep language brief and efficient—something that normally aids smooth conversation—can backfire when the listener lacks the background needed to interpret what is said. The study emphasises that miscommunication is not about mistakes; it is often the result of reasonable strategies that do not match up in real-time interaction. These findings suggest that improving communication, particularly in high-pressure or high-risk environments, means paying close attention to both language form and context. Simple misunderstandings can escalate when cues are misread. By recognising the signals that precede miscommunication, it may be possible to design better tools and training to support clearer interaction, especially in fields like medicine, aviation, or emergency response, where the cost of a misheard word can be extremely high.

[9] Paxton, A., Roche, J.M., Ibarra, A. and Tanenhaus, M.K. (2020) 'Predictions of Miscommunication in Verbal Communication During Collaborative Joint Action', Topics in Cognitive Science, 12(3), pp. 1042–1063.

1.2. Biased language

(The filters of thought: Bias and the fragility of interpretation)

'Every act of communication is a gamble: what is said is never what is heard'.

— Jacques Derrida, Limited Inc.

'Meaning is not what the speaker intends, nor what the listener hears—but what survives between them'.

— Stanley Fish, Is There a Text in This Class?

'All words are prejudices'.

— Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science

Bias

Bias can be understood as a tendency to lean in favour of or against something in a way that often distorts perception or judgment. It may be built into personal beliefs or arise from social learning. In everyday life, bias affects conversations, decisions, and relationships. In science, it refers to systematic errors that distort results, such as when data is gathered or interpreted unfairly. Whether conscious or not, bias influences how people see the world and how they act in it. The word comes from Old French and Provençal roots that mean 'slant' or 'sideways'. It was first used in English to describe the curve of a weighted bowling ball, which veers off course due to its shape. Over time, the term came to refer to minds that drift off balance, pulled by partial views or prior leanings. Cognitive bias is among the most common types. These are systematic errors in how people think, remember, or make decisions. For instance, anchoring describes the way people fixate on initial information and fail to adjust enough from it. Apophenia involves seeing patterns in randomness, which can cause people to draw false connections. The halo effect leads someone to judge a person’s entire character based on a single positive trait, while the horn effect does the opposite. Confirmation bias is another major type, where people seek information that matches their beliefs and ignore what does not. These habits shape how opinions form and how they resist change. Other biases are tied to personal or financial gain. Conflict of interest occurs when someone’s judgment is influenced by outside benefit. Bribery and favouritism fall into this category. Lobbying can also introduce bias by tilting public policy in favour of powerful interests rather than broader well-being. In research, bias can undermine the credibility of findings. Statistical bias emerges when data is skewed by flawed methods or sample selection. Forecast bias happens when predictions consistently miss in one direction. The observer-expectancy effect shows how researchers’ expectations can influence subjects. Social desirability bias occurs when people give answers that make them look good rather than tell the truth. Bias is also present in social prejudices. Racism, sexism, classism, and ageism all involve judgments based on identity rather than facts. Implicit bias, a term coined by psychologists Mahzarin Banaji and Anthony Greenwald, refers to unconscious attitudes that guide reactions and decisions. These biases often work beneath

the surface and can shape behaviour in ways people do not recognise. Context shapes how bias appears. In education, some textbooks may present a biased view of history or culture. In the media, stories can be selected or framed to support certain narratives. In law enforcement, practices like racial profiling reveal how deeply bias can be embedded in institutions. In sum, bias is more than just a personal flaw. It can be cognitive, social, or structural. It can affect judgment, communication, science, and justice. Recognising its many forms is the first step toward addressing its effects.

Reality of cognitive illusions

In their research[10] on judgment under uncertainty, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky argue that humans often rely on mental shortcuts, or heuristics, that help in decision-making but also lead to consistent errors. Their work focuses on biases that arise from using heuristics such as availability, representativeness, and anchoring. These biases, they suggest, are not random flaws but systematic patterns that reveal how the mind simplifies complex problems. Critics, particularly Gerd Gigerenzer, have challenged their claims. Gigerenzer argues that what Kahneman and Tversky call 'cognitive illusions' are not true errors. He believes that if problems are presented in terms of frequencies rather than probabilities, these supposed biases vanish. According to him, people are adapted to reason well in natural environments where frequency information is more relevant. But Kahneman and Tversky respond that their findings remain consistent even when frequency formats are used. They present data showing that people still neglect base rates or commit conjunction errors even when information is presented in a way that should, in theory, make the right answer more obvious. Base-rate neglect is a key example. Even when participants are told how common certain traits are in a population, they tend to ignore this and focus instead on how much a given description matches a stereotype. This remains true whether the information is given as probabilities or frequencies. The same holds for conjunction errors, where people judge the likelihood of two events occurring together as more probable than one event alone. This breaks a basic rule of probability and shows up even when questions are reformatted using frequencies. Overconfidence is another recurring issue. People often express more certainty in their judgments than the evidence supports. Kahneman and Tversky argue that this is because people rely on the 'inside view', focusing on the unique features of a specific case, rather than considering broader statistical trends. This pattern shows up in many areas, from business forecasts to personal planning. The design of experiments also matters. When participants are given multiple related tasks in a within-subjects format, they can compare and calibrate their answers more accurately. But when asked just one question in isolation—a between-subjects design—biases are more likely to appear. This undermines Gigerenzer's claim that biases only occur in artificial settings or due to poor testing methods. Kahneman and Tversky stress that the illusions they study are not just artefacts but reflect deeper cognitive tendencies. Their response to criticism emphasises the robustness of their approach. Rather than dismissing cognitive illusions as theoretical errors, they argue that the persistence of these biases reveals something important about human reasoning. Simple heuristics help people manage uncertainty, but they come at a cost. The debate between the two camps illustrates the ongoing effort to understand the strengths and limits of the mind's intuitive tools.

[10] Kahneman, D. and Tversky, A. (1996) 'On the reality of cognitive illusions', Psychological Review, 103(3), pp. 582–591.

Partisan journalism and media bias

Jim A. Kuypers argues that American journalism has long been shaped by underlying political leanings, evolving from openly partisan newspapers into a mainstream media that still retains strong ideological bias—now more subtly embedded in journalistic practice. In the introduction to 'Partisan Journalism: A History of Media Bias in the United States[11]', Kuypers begins by examining media reactions during the early years of Barack Obama's presidency. He highlights how Democratic leaders dismissed opposing views as conspiratorial or unpatriotic, framing dissent as illegitimate rather than engaging with it directly. According to Kuypers, this reflects a broader shift in journalism—a 'conspiracy of shared values'—that prioritises liberal viewpoints while marginalising others. This ideological bias is not new, but its form has changed. In the early days of American journalism, newspapers openly supported specific political parties. These early publications were tools of political advocacy, funded by parties or governments to influence public opinion. Papers declared their allegiances and made no pretence of neutrality. During the colonial and Jacksonian periods, the press was integral to political organising and messaging. Editors were often rewarded with positions or contracts in exchange for favourable coverage. The Post Office facilitated wide distribution, enabling political ideas to reach small communities across the country. What changed, Kuypers notes, was not the presence of bias but how it was presented. As the penny press emerged in the 1830s and 1840s, papers began targeting mass audiences. Commercial imperatives pushed publishers to appear more neutral. Advertising revenue demanded broader appeal, and this encouraged a surface-level objectivity. Yet even as newspapers shifted to fact-based reporting, the framing of stories, selection of issues, and labelling of sources often reflected hidden preferences. The emergence of wire services and technologies like the telegraph emphasised speed and factual accuracy, further embedding the ideal of journalistic neutrality. But Kuypers suggests that bias never disappeared—it simply moved from overt declarations to more coded forms of influence. By the 20th century, objectivity became the standard for respectable journalism. Anchors like Walter Cronkite symbolised this norm, even as the seeds of advocacy remained. Over time, particularly in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate, public trust declined, and journalists began to openly express their political views. Kuypers argues that this evolution toward advocacy journalism has blurred the line between news and opinion. With the rise of talk radio, cable news, and digital platforms in the 1980s and 1990s, alternative voices challenged the liberal consensus in mainstream media. Today, media bias persists, not through open declarations, but through framing, tone, and selective reporting. Kuypers shows that bias is a consistent feature of American journalism, though its form has changed. From overtly partisan newspapers to ideologically aligned but nominally objective media, the press has always reflected political values. Recognising these patterns is essential for understanding how journalism shapes public discourse and political power.

Written language bias in linguistics

In 'The Written Language Bias in Linguistics[12]' Per Linell argues that modern linguistics suffers from a persistent bias toward written language. Despite widespread agreement that spoken language comes first in both individual development and human history, the dominant theories in the language sciences continue to reflect assumptions rooted in written

[11] Kuypers, J. A. (2013) Partisan Journalism: A History of Media Bias in the United States. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

[12] Linell, P. (2005) The Written Language Bias in Linguistics: Its Nature, Origins and Transformations. London: Routledge.

communication. This contradiction runs deep. Linguistic models often treat language as a static system of abstract forms—morphemes, words, and sentences—rather than a set of socially embedded practices. Much of linguistic theory, from grammar and phonology to semantics and discourse analysis, reflects values drawn from the culture of writing: structure, clarity, permanence, and formal correctness. Linell traces this bias through a long intellectual history. Western linguistics has traditionally focused on language as a formal object. From Aristotle through to Saussure and Chomsky, language has been defined in terms of its structure—rules, categories, and symbolic relationships. Writing fits neatly into this model. Written texts are composed of visible, discrete units that can be isolated, analysed, and compared. They endure through time and space. They also encourage standardisation and allow for editing, which makes them appear more organised and complete than spontaneous speech. Over time, these properties have shaped how linguists think about language itself. In contrast, spoken language is fleeting, embodied, and co-produced in real time. It depends on context, gestures, facial expressions, and turn-taking. It allows for interruptions, repetitions, repairs, and hesitations. Talk is more than a string of sounds—it is a social act, responsive and shaped by interaction. Yet this richness is often overlooked when language is studied only through transcripts or reduced to a set of abstract rules. Linell highlights how speech is often treated as deficient or incomplete, a rough version of the polished, correct form captured in writing. The book outlines two major ways of understanding language. One approach, dominant in structural and generative linguistics, views language as an abstract system of forms. Language is understood as a mental code, independent of its use. The other approach, emerging from fields like conversation analysis and sociolinguistics, sees language as social action. Here, speaking is not just transmitting meaning—it is doing something with others in a shared context. This view emphasises talk-in-interaction and considers language a practical accomplishment. Linell stresses that the written language bias is not just theoretical. It affects how language is taught, assessed, and preserved. Educational systems privilege written language. Grammar rules are derived from writing, and students are taught that writing reflects the correct form of the language. Dialects and speech varieties that do not conform to these standards are often stigmatised. Even in research, spoken language data is usually transcribed and analysed through frameworks designed for writing. This reinforces the idea that language is best understood in visual, discrete, and fixed units. The divide between speech and writing is not absolute, however. New technologies blur the lines. Online messages, voice notes, and social media posts combine elements of both media. Some speech events are highly scripted, while some writing mimics informal speech. Despite these overlaps, the underlying assumptions in linguistic theory still favour writing. Linell calls for a shift away from this narrow view. He argues for a more dialogical perspective that recognises language as something people do together. This would mean taking spoken interaction seriously—not just as raw data to be cleaned up, but as language in its fullest, most dynamic form. Linell's analysis reveals a deep contradiction at the heart of linguistics. Although speech is recognised as primary in human communication, the field continues to be shaped by values and assumptions derived from writing. This written language bias limits how language is understood and studied. To move forward, linguistic theory must acknowledge the social, interactive, and embodied nature of language in use.

People's languages vs. Linguists' grammars

In 'The Written Language Bias in Linguistics' Per Linell also explores the deep divide between how ordinary people experience language and how linguists define and model it. One of the central issues he raises is that linguists often create abstract systems—grammars—that reflect their own theoretical commitments rather than the actual, lived practices of language

users. These grammars, while structured and elegant, frequently fail to capture the messiness, context-dependence, and variability of real speech. Instead of describing language as people use it, many linguistic theories describe language as it appears on paper. A key source of this gap lies in what Linell calls the 'written language bias'. From the earliest stages of linguistic theorising, scholars have relied on texts—written sentences, formal rules, dictionaries—to model what language is. This bias has led to a belief in language as a stable, standardised object. Words and sentences are treated as fixed units with defined meanings and grammatical relationships. But this is not how language operates in daily life. People speak in fragments, repeat themselves, shift topics, change registers, rely on gestures, and interpret meaning based on context. Theories built on writing often ignore or minimise these features. One important debate Linell discusses is about where language 'is'. Some scholars, like Roy Harris, argue that language is not an external system to be discovered but a set of ideas constructed by linguists. For Harris, many linguistic theories are 'made-up' in the sense that they impose artificial order on practices that are far more fluid. Others, like Noam Chomsky, argue the opposite: that language is a mental structure, a cognitive system hardwired into the human brain. For Chomsky, the way people speak—full of errors, hesitations, and regional differences—is irrelevant. What matters is the idealised internal grammar shared by all native speakers. This leads to a curious conclusion: that people's everyday language is linguistically irrelevant. Linell takes issue with both extremes. He suggests that language must be understood as a social activity that emerges from interaction. It is not just in the brain, nor just a cultural invention. It is something people do together. The theories linguists construct should not float above actual speech practices. They should be grounded in how people talk, listen, respond, and make meaning together. This dialogical view of language insists that grammar is not a fixed code but a pattern that evolves through use. The tension between people's languages and linguists' grammars also has political and educational consequences. Standard languages—those codified in textbooks and grammar guides—are often treated as the only legitimate forms of language. Dialects, slang, and nonstandard varieties are dismissed as incorrect. Yet these so-called 'errors' are often rule-governed and expressive, shaped by history, identity, and social function. Linguistic theory, by favouring abstract rules over everyday usage, helps reinforce linguistic inequality. Linell argues for a shift in how language is studied. Rather than starting with theories built from written norms, linguists should begin with actual speech. Language should be seen as dynamic, embodied, and socially situated. People's languages are not broken versions of ideal grammar; they are the real thing. The grammars linguists build must be brought closer to the languages people live by.

Language divide

In 'The Study of Speech Processes: Addressing the Writing Bias in Language Science[13]' Victor J. Boucher explores how language science has long been shaped by a bias toward writing. From the earliest language classes to academic research, the study of language is typically grounded in written examples and standardised transcriptions. Students are introduced to sentences as neat, rule-governed units on a page, detached from the physical and sensory realities of spoken communication. This focus on text encourages the view that language is an abstract mental system, separate from the messier, embodied act of speaking. Boucher argues that this perspective creates a deep divide between language and speech. Alphabetic writing, with its clear segments and punctuation, imposes a structure on speech that does not naturally

[13] Boucher, V. J. (2020) The Study of Speech Processes: Addressing the Writing Bias in Language Science. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

exist. Transcriptions, especially in unfamiliar languages, often misrepresent the fluidity, rhythm, and nuance of real-time interaction. As a result, linguists may treat written language as more foundational than spoken language, even though speech is primary in human development and social interaction. This division has roots in the history of linguistic thought. Thinkers like Ferdinand de Saussure promoted the idea of a language faculty housed in the brain, distinct from speech. Saussure's focus on arbitrary signs and mental representations suggested that language could be studied independently of how people speak. Clinical studies of aphasia supported this view, reinforcing the belief that language resides in isolated brain regions like Broca's area. But modern research has challenged these assumptions. Observations from surgical cases and studies of infants with severe brain malformations show that speech and language are more widely distributed in the brain and more integrated than once thought. The idea that language is purely a cognitive system is further undermined by evidence from acoustic phonetics. Studies by researchers like Lindblom demonstrate that vowel systems can be predicted based on how sounds are produced and perceived. For instance, speakers tend to create vowels that maximise auditory contrast, suggesting that phonological systems are shaped by physical and sensory constraints, not just abstract mental rules. This challenges the belief that phonemes and other linguistic features exist independently of their spoken form. Boucher also critiques the tools traditionally used to study speech. Because early linguists lacked instruments to measure speech acoustics, they relied on transcriptions and invented categories like phonemes based on written representation. Even today, these categories persist in textbooks and theoretical models, despite being at odds with what actual speech data show. Technologies like spectrograms and motion tracking now reveal that speech is continuous, overlapping, and shaped by feedback between movement and perception. Boucher calls for a shift in how linguists approach language. Rather than treating speech as secondary to written language, researchers should start from the motor-sensory processes that define spoken communication. Language is not a detached code, but a dynamic, embodied activity shaped by physical constraints and social context. Recognising this reality is essential for building a science of language that reflects how people speak and understand one another.

The bias of communication

In 'The Bias of Communication[14]' Harold Innis examines how different media of communication shape the development of culture, politics, and knowledge. His core argument is that every medium has a built-in bias. Some preserve information over long periods, while others enable it to travel quickly across space. This technical difference is not neutral. It affects how societies organise power and how cultures evolve. Innis traces this bias back to the earliest civilisations. Ancient Mesopotamia used clay tablets for record keeping. The medium was durable, which meant knowledge could last through generations. But it was heavy and hard to transport, making it better for local administration than for spreading ideas across large territories. Egypt, by contrast, used papyrus. It was lighter and more mobile, which allowed for broader communication but at the cost of permanence. Each medium carried with it a set of social consequences. The type of medium a civilisation favours tends to reflect its priorities. Durable media like stone or parchment support long-term institutions, centralised control, and religious or legal authority. In Egypt, for instance, the material conditions—such as the Nile's floods and the use of monumental architecture—encouraged a focus on time, death, and continuity. This was reflected in the construction of pyramids and the fixation on calendars and mummification. Writing, through hieroglyphics, became a tool to reinforce divine authority and

[14] Innis, H. (1951) The Bias of Communication. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

central governance. In contrast, societies that embraced lighter media often developed more flexible, decentralised forms of governance. In Mesopotamia, trade and local autonomy flourished as clay and cuneiform facilitated short-range, practical communication. The invention of the alphabet and its spread through papyrus brought new possibilities. It allowed for quicker learning and wider use, reducing the monopoly of writing held by priestly or royal elites. When the printing press emerged in Europe, it marked a turning point. The transition from handwritten manuscripts to mass-produced books broke the control of knowledge by narrow institutions like the church. It opened the door to vernacular languages, secular literature, and widespread education. This led to major political and religious upheavals, including the Reformation and the Enlightenment. New media did not just change how information was shared. They altered who could access knowledge and who had the power to define it. Innis also explores the rise of modern media such as newspapers, radio, and film. Each brought its own form of bias. Newspapers encouraged regional diversity and civic engagement. Radio, however, promoted centralised messaging. Its immediacy and reach made it a tool of state propaganda and corporate influence. The more centralised a medium becomes, the more it tends to favour uniformity over dialogue, continuity over change. The tension between oral and written traditions is a central theme in Innis's work. Oral cultures emphasise memory, performance, and community. They allow knowledge to adapt and evolve through conversation. Written cultures, especially when dominated by one medium, tend to freeze meaning and authority. Yet neither form is permanent. Each new medium disrupts the balance, reshaping how people communicate, govern, and remember. Innis warns that societies often become trapped by their dominant media. When a medium becomes too powerful, it creates monopolies of knowledge that stifle innovation and isolate communication. The solution is not to reject media, but to remain aware of their influence. Only by recognising the bias of each medium can cultures maintain balance between permanence and change, between control and creativity.

Guide to media bias

In 'Skewed: A Critical Thinker's Guide to Media Bias Larry Atkins[15]' Larry Atkins explores how communication media influence the way people perceive reality and how these influences can distort the democratic process. His work builds on the recognition that every form of media brings with it a particular bias, not just in content, but in structure. Whether it is a newspaper, television broadcast, or a digital platform, the format itself shapes what is said and how it is received. This bias, though often subtle, has powerful effects on the distribution of knowledge and the formation of public opinion. Historically, the medium used to preserve and transmit information has shaped cultural and political development. Ancient civilisations relied on materials like stone or clay, which were heavy and durable. These media favoured permanence over flexibility. In Egypt, for example, the use of stone inscriptions helped enforce religious and royal authority. In contrast, more portable materials like papyrus allowed for wider dissemination of texts and a loosening of centralised control. As new forms of media became available, they disrupted older systems of knowledge and power. The invention of the printing press in Europe marked a major shift. It enabled mass literacy and challenged the monopoly of the church and state over written knowledge. Books became more accessible, and the use of vernacular languages flourished. This was followed by newspapers, which expanded public access to information and allowed for more immediate engagement with current events. But as Atkins notes, even these developments came with limitations. Print media, for all their democratising potential, could still serve elite interests through ownership, editorial control,

[15] Atkins, L. (2016) Skewed: A Critical Thinker's Guide to Media Bias. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

and selective reporting. In modern times, the proliferation of cable news and digital platforms has intensified media bias. Advocacy journalism, as Atkins calls it, deliberately blends fact and opinion to support specific ideological positions. This form of journalism does not just report the news—it frames it in ways that reinforce existing beliefs. The result is a fragmented media environment in which different audiences live in informational bubbles. People receive stories tailored to their political leanings, and exposure to opposing views becomes increasingly rare. This trend has serious implications. When media sources reinforce rather than challenge beliefs, public discourse becomes polarised. Viewers trust outlets that confirm their worldview and distrust those that do not. The emphasis on emotional appeal, outrage, and sensationalism further reduces the space for balanced analysis. Atkins argues that this is not just a matter of personal preference or political taste. It reflects deeper structural changes in how media are produced, consumed, and monetised. Understanding the historical and technical aspects of communication helps explain why media bias has become more entrenched. From the carved symbols of early civilisation to the high-speed circulation of online headlines, the form of media has always shaped its content. As Atkins points out, modern technologies have amplified this effect, making it easier for media outlets to customise their messages—and for audiences to avoid anything unfamiliar or uncomfortable.

Rationalist bias

In 'Trumping Reason: Rationalist Bias in Communication Theory[16]' Leonard Shedletsky explores how traditional communication theory often leans on rationalist assumptions, overlooking the role of intuition, emotion, and cognitive bias in human discourse. His critique is especially relevant in the context of Donald Trump's political communication, which resists rational critique yet remains effective. Trump's language does not rely on logical argument but instead activates instinctual reactions. His success lies not in his evidence, but in his emotional resonance with followers. This exposes a gap in communication theory, which often assumes people make decisions by weighing facts and logic. People frequently rely on quick, affective judgments. Shedletsky, drawing on Roy Schwartzman's research, explains how Trump's rhetoric bypasses rational processes. It uses vivid anecdotes instead of statistics, appeals to fear and disgust, and frames opponents as threats to moral purity. His repeated claims, even when proven false, tap into mental shortcuts that shape people's understanding of reality. Concepts like the availability heuristic and loss aversion explain why emotionally charged, simple messages gain traction. For example, calling COVID-19 the 'China virus' simplifies a complex issue while triggering xenophobic associations. These rhetorical choices are not accidental. They exploit cognitive habits that resist correction. Moral foundations theory adds another layer. Trump's messages activate values like loyalty, sanctity, and authority. These resonate deeply with his base, forming moral narratives that define who belong and who threatens the group. In this framework, facts matter less than alignment with one's moral community. Attempts to counter misinformation with evidence often fail because they do not address the emotional and moral structures supporting belief. The rationalist model assumes people will adjust their views when presented with facts. But emotional attachments to certain narratives create a filter through which all new information is processed. This bias in communication theory mirrors another psychological phenomenon—pseudostupidity. Lawrence Cohn, a psychoanalyst, describes it as a defensive inhibition where people seem less intelligent than they are because of unresolved internal conflicts. In political discourse, something similar

[16] Shedletsky, L. (2020) Trumping Reason: Rationalist Bias in Communication Theory. In R. Schwartzman (ed.) Political Communication in the Post-Truth Era. London: Routledge.

happens. People may reject obvious truths not because they are unintelligent, but because accepting them threatens their identity or loyalties. Trump's communication taps into these defences, reinforcing a worldview that feels secure, even when it is logically flawed. Emotional satisfaction outweighs intellectual clarity. Shedletsky calls for a revision of communication theory. He argues that to understand public discourse today, especially in a post-truth environment, scholars must incorporate cognitive science, psychology, and behavioural economics. Communication is not just an exchange of ideas; it is a drama of identity, emotion, and power. Messages are not weighed on a rational scale but embraced or rejected based on how they make people feel and what they affirm about their values. In conclusion, Shedletsky, like Schwartzman's and Cohn's, highlights how emotional bias, heuristics, and unconscious defences shape political speech and public belief. Human communication is driven less by slow, deliberate reasoning than by rapid, unconscious intuitions, making the social intuitionist view a more accurate framework than the rationalist model. Rationalist bias blinds communication theory to the reality that people embrace messages less for their logic than for the emotional and moral worlds they affirm.

Dialectical analysis of bias

In 'One-Sided Arguments: A Dialectical Analysis of Bias[17]' Douglas Walton offers a detailed examination of how bias functions in argumentation, particularly in informal logic and critical thinking. His central claim is that bias is not always negative; instead, it can range from acceptable partiality to a dangerous distortion of reasoning. The issue arises when arguments become so one-sided that they fail to engage with counterarguments or resist reasonable doubt. Walton traces this problem back to classical philosophy, where Plato and Aristotle distinguished between dialectical exchange and the eristic methods of the Sophists. Dialectic, for them, was a cooperative search for truth, while eristic was combative and focused on winning, often at the expense of fairness. Historically, the study of bias was revived during the Enlightenment. Thinkers like Francis Bacon and Antoine Arnauld identified personal interest, emotion, and self-deception as barriers to clear thinking. By the 20th century, textbooks had begun to treat bias as a psychological and rhetorical problem, focusing on how language, suggestion, and selective emphasis distort perception. Walton critiques this approach, arguing that focusing solely on the motives or psychology of the speaker misses the point. What matters more is the structure of the argument and how it plays out in dialogue. Walton emphasises that some bias is unavoidable. Having a point of view or even a commitment to a position does not necessarily undermine an argument. Problems arise only when one refuses to consider opposing views or fails to revise their stance when challenged by evidence. A judge, for example, can have personal beliefs yet still act impartially if they are able to suspend those beliefs in a fair-minded evaluation. Similarly, in everyday discourse, one may start from a biased position but still engage critically and revise their view. This openness to change distinguishes fairmindedness from dogmatism. One of Walton's key contributions is identifying ten practical indicators for detecting bias. These include financial interest, selective argument use, treating similar cases differently, rigid stereotyping, and the use of innuendo or hyperbole. While no single indicator proves bias on its own, several taken together can reveal a troubling pattern. For example, when someone repeats exaggerated claims, ignores opposing evidence, and refuses to acknowledge similar counterexamples, it becomes harder to see their argument as rational. Instead, it reflects a closed system of thought meant to reinforce a belief rather than test it. Walton argues that detecting bias requires looking at how the dialogue unfolds. Does the

[17] Walton, D. (1999) One-Sided Arguments: A Dialectical Analysis of Bias. Albany: SUNY Press.

speaker engage opposing views seriously? Do they make concessions or adjust their claims in response to challenges? If not, their argument is biased. But bias, in this sense, is not just about tone or intention—it is about behaviour in dialogue. Walton calls for a balanced view of bias. It is not always a sign of bad faith or irrationality. Instead, it can signal a point of departure for productive dialogue, provided the speaker remains open to other views. Bias becomes problematic only when it blocks this openness and replaces dialectic with stubborn one-sidedness. When bias is met with openness, it can deepen understanding; when it closes off inquiry, it turns conversation into dogma.

Biased language

In Chapter Five of his book 'One-Sided Arguments: A Dialectical Analysis of Bias', Douglas Walton explores how language itself can embed bias into arguments. He focuses on the strategic use of slanted or emotionally charged words that subtly support one side of a dispute while undermining the other. These linguistic choices shape perception and often pre-empt deeper analysis. When a political group calls its opponents 'terrorists' while referring to its own members as 'freedom fighters', it uses language to do more than describe—it persuades and polarises. Walton raises two key questions. First, is the use of biased language harmful to serious argumentation? Second, if it is, what can be done about it? These questions do not have simple answers. Some argue that all language is biased by nature. Words carry connotations shaped by history, ideology, and culture. Postmodernists, for instance, embrace the political charge of words, proposing new terms to reflect alternate worldviews. On the other hand, traditional logic often sees persuasive definitions and slanted expressions as fallacies that cloud critical thinking. The abortion debate illustrates how language can drive division. One side might describe abortion as 'killing babies', while the other frames it as 'reproductive choice'. Both phrases reflect strong positions and leave little room for open discussion. When both parties redefine the same word according to their interests, dialogue breaks down. People end up talking past each other, reinforcing their own positions without confronting the core ethical dilemmas. The use of biased language also extends to media and politics. Journalists or officials may use vague but emotionally powerful phrases like 'cleaning up the streets' or 'restoring order'. These expressions sound positive but often mask coercive or violent actions. Similarly, calling a leader a 'strongman' instead of a 'dictator' shifts the tone of the conversation without changing the facts. The public may be influenced without fully realising it. Definitions, especially in policy or scientific debates, can carry significant weight. For example, poverty may be defined in absolute terms—income below a certain level—or in relative terms—limited access to social resources. Each definition frames the issue differently and leads to different solutions. Feminist critiques of pornography also rely on redefining terms. By describing it as the objectification of women rather than mere erotic material, the conversation shifts toward questions of harm and power. Biased definitions can distort results. In breast cancer research, Walton points out that studies defined menopause differently, leading to conflicting conclusions. This inconsistency, driven by language, undermined the reliability of the findings. In such cases, bias is not just a rhetorical issue—it affects real-world knowledge. Walton does not suggest that persuasive definitions are always wrong. In advocacy, such definitions can be effective tools for shaping public debate. However, in contexts that demand fairness and clarity—like law, science, or academic discussion—biased language can obstruct critical reasoning. The key is recognising when slanted language is being used and understanding its impact. Biased language is neither always fallacious nor always neutral. It becomes problematic when it conceals disagreement, manipulates perception, or substitutes emotion for evidence. To evaluate arguments fairly, one must learn to detect these linguistic cues and judge them within

their proper context. Every dialect is a fossilized worldview, carrying within its grammar and rhythms the prejudices of the tribe that spoke it into being—its gods, taboos, laws, and unspoken hierarchies woven into every word. An official language isn't a neutral medium but a state-curated creed—standardizing accent and syntax, canonising its myths and norms, demoting rival tongues—so that bias hardens into grammar.

1.3. Miscommunication axiom

(From dialogue to disconnection: The erosion of symbolic life)

'Miscommunication is the rule, not the exception; language is a medium of approximation, not precision'.

— Paul Watzlawick, Pragmatics of Human Communication

'Meaning is not what the speaker intends, nor what the listener hears—but what survives between them'.

— Stanley Fish, Is There a Text in This Class?

'Communication fails not in spite of language, but because of it'.

— Niklas Luhmann, Social Systems

Miscommunication

Miscommunication is often thought of in simple terms—as a misunderstanding or as the transmission of false or unclear information. In this narrow view, the problem lies in language not functioning as intended. Either the speaker fails to express their thoughts with precision, or the listener fails to comprehend the message correctly. But this functional definition conceals a deeper and more troubling implication. If communication is what binds people into societies, families, and communities, then miscommunication is not just an error of words—it is a rupture in communion itself. The prefix 'mis' does not only signify a mistake. It also carries the sense of harm, failure, or corruption. Thus, miscommunication can also mean 'bad communion'—the breakdown of shared meaning that forms the foundation of social life. In this broader sense, miscommunication is not merely a technical glitch. It is the sign of an ill society. When the structures that allow mutual understanding collapse, people no longer share a common language, not just in the lexical sense but in their values, emotions, and intentions. This collapse turns the group from a community into a crowd of isolated speakers. In such contexts, each word becomes a suspect, each utterance a potential betrayal. The consequences are not trivial. Miscommunication becomes the precondition for suspicion, alienation, and conflict. It is the opposite of communion, not just in the religious sense, but in the etymological one: to share, to participate, to be part of a whole. Social theorists have long noted that the failure to communicate is often a symptom of deeper fractures. In families, miscommunication is rarely about syntax or grammar. It is about silences, omissions, and competing realities. In groups, it signals the disintegration of trust and the rise of factions. And in societies, miscommunication

grows where narratives multiply, and no single story holds sway. In such a landscape, the danger is not only that people fail to understand each other, but that they no longer expect to. From a philosophical perspective, miscommunication is the breakdown of intersubjectivity. It marks the point at which two people no longer inhabit the same mental or emotional universe. They may speak the same language, but the words fall into a void, stripped of resonance. The speaker intends one thing, the listener receives another, and both remain trapped in the illusion of dialogue. This is not a minor error. It is a structural failure. When repeated at scale, it becomes social pathology. In this sense, miscommunication is more than a barrier; it is a symptom. It reveals how far individuals have drifted from a shared symbolic order. The increase in linguistic complexity, jargon, euphemism, or ideological speech often does not improve clarity but contributes to misalignment. When speech becomes a performance, a defence, or a form of camouflage, then communication ceases to be a tool of communion and becomes a weapon or a wall. Contemporary society is marked by the proliferation of such walls. Information technologies have expanded the quantity of communication while often degrading its quality. Algorithms optimise for engagement, not for truth. News becomes noise, and dialogue fragments into isolated monologues. This is not just a communication crisis; it is a crisis of community. If no one truly listens, and no one frankly speaks, then people do not merely misunderstand one another—they cease to belong to the same symbolic world. The psychological toll of this is profound. Individuals report feelings of being unheard, unseen, and misunderstood not just in their personal relationships but in public life. The loneliness and alienation that follow are not individual failures but collective symptoms. Miscommunication, in this view, is a kind of cultural illness. It spreads not through language alone, but through the erosion of the conditions that make communication meaningful: attention, patience, goodwill, and shared reference. In its most extreme form, miscommunication fuels the machinery of conflict. When words no longer carry stable meanings, intentions are always suspect. In this context, misunderstanding escalates into misjudgement and into violence. A society that cannot talk to itself eventually breaks apart. The more people talk past each other, the closer they come to treating each other as enemies. Here, the failure to align minds becomes the justification for domination or exclusion. Dialogue gives way to accusation, and the space of common understanding shrinks until only tribal speech remains. To speak of miscommunication, then, is not simply to diagnose a conversational failure. It is to name the weakening of the symbolic tissue that holds groups together. As such, the cure is not simply better phrasing, or clearer speech. It requires a reconstitution of the conditions of communicative life. It demands not only that people mean what they say, but that they want to mean it to someone else—and that there is someone listening who cares to understand.

Dynamics of miscommunication

In 'Talking at Cross-Purposes: The Dynamics of Miscommunication[18]', Angeliki Tzanne examines how misunderstandings emerge, develop, and are managed in everyday talk. Rather than treating miscommunication as a simple breakdown in information exchange, she views it as an evolving, context-dependent interaction between speaker and hearer. The book brings together several strands of research and organises them into a clear account of how miscommunication works. Many earlier studies on miscommunication focused on settings like cross-cultural conversations or clinical interactions, where failure to understand could lead to serious consequences. These studies often centred on the broad causes of misunderstanding,

[18] Tzanne, A. (2000) Talking at Cross-Purposes: The Dynamics of Miscommunication. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

such as differences in language, social norms, or cultural expectations. Tzanne acknowledges this background but moves the discussion toward the turn-by-turn structure of talk itself. Her analysis highlights the conversational dynamics that allow miscommunication to arise even in ordinary, familiar exchanges. A central theme is that miscommunication happens not only when messages are poorly delivered or misheard, but also when they are interpreted differently from how the speaker intended. Much of the confusion lies in mismatched assumptions or frames of reference. These mismatches can occur in sensitive moments—such as openings, requests, or disagreements—where the stakes of interpretation are high. The interactional nature of these points means that meaning is always being negotiated, often in ways that neither party fully controls. Tzanne also tackles the confusion surrounding terminology. Terms like misperception, misinterpretation, or communicative breakdown are often used interchangeably, though they point to different issues. She proposes a distinction: miscommunication refers to the overall phenomenon of message failure, while a misunderstanding is a specific moment where a speaker's intended meaning does not align with what the hearer takes from it. This approach allows for a clearer analysis of how misunderstandings are produced and handled in interaction. Importantly, the book shifts attention away from blame. Misunderstandings are not always the result of error or failure. They may emerge gradually, and participants often become aware of them only after several turns. Sometimes, people even use ambiguity or deliberate vagueness as a way of navigating difficult topics or preserving face. In these cases, the boundary between strategic communication and misunderstanding becomes blurred. Tzanne's work suggests that even though social factors such as cultural background, professional status, or gender can influence communication, they do not determine it entirely. What matters most is the local context in which meaning is created and revised. Speakers and hearers bring their assumptions, intentions, and awareness to the conversation, and the outcome depends on how these elements interact over time. Miscommunication is a natural and inevitable feature of human dialogue. Not a bug to fix but a diagnostic trace of how people negotiate meaning under uncertainty. Theories of mass communication should begin there, abandoning utopian myths of perfect clarity or a lost universal tongue that mask how standardized languages have long served coordination but also deception, manipulation, and population control. Thus, mass miscommunication is both the predictable outcome and the only honest point of departure for our field.

Creation of linguistic miscommunication

In 'An essay on the organisation of experience[19]' Erving Goffman show that misunderstanding is not a simple mistake, but a product of the interactive process through which meaning is shaped. It is not enough to look at individual phrases or isolated errors. What matters is the dynamic context in which utterances occur and the interpretive assumptions both speakers and listeners bring to each turn in a conversation. Rather than treating miscommunication as something that happens in a vacuum, the study considers how language operates on multiple levels. There is the literal content of what is said, and there is the force behind it—the social intention, the emotional tone, or the role it plays in structuring talk. Speakers may mean to inform, criticise, request, or tease, and listeners must figure out both what the speaker is saying and why they are saying it. Miscommunication often emerges when these levels are not aligned or when the hearer misreads either one. One common source of confusion lies in the use of

[19] Goffman, E. (1974). Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience. [online] psycnet.apa.org. Available at: https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1975-09476-000.

ambiguous references. Words like 'this', 'that', or 'it' depend heavily on context. If the hearer misidentifies the referent, the conversation may take an entirely different direction. People tend to rely on what was just said to resolve these ambiguities, which can be misleading if the speaker had something else in mind. This shows how misunderstanding is often created not through error alone, but through normal interpretive habits. Another factor is topic management. When speakers shift topics or change roles without clearly signalling it, listeners may continue to interpret new utterances through the lens of the previous subject. This results in responses that appear off-track, even though they make sense from the listener's perspective. In these cases, neither participant is necessarily at fault. The misunderstanding grows out of the way meaning is constructed incrementally and contextually. Miscommunication can also result from how speakers manage interpersonal dynamics. Sometimes, people deliberately speak vaguely or indirectly to soften a blow, avoid confrontation, or save face. These face-saving strategies can themselves lead to misunderstanding, especially if the hearer takes the words at face value. In such moments, language functions both as a tool for communication and as a shield against vulnerability or conflict. Finally, the process of repair—the attempt to fix a misunderstanding—is rarely straightforward. It often involves several steps, and the repair itself can be shaped by social roles and power relationships. In workplace or institutional settings, for example, less powerful participants may pretend not to understand to resist authority without open defiance. This perspective shifts the focus away from blaming individuals for communication failures and toward understanding how linguistic and social factors interact to create meaning. Miscommunication is best seen not as a breakdown, but as part of the normal flow of human interaction, where interpretation is always in flux.

Dynamics of disordered dialogue

In their article 'The Dynamics of Disordered Dialogue[20]', David A. Kupferschmidt and Joshua A. Gordon explore how deficits in spatial working memory (SWM), a central symptom of schizophrenia, arise from disrupted communication between key brain regions. The prefrontal cortex (PFC), hippocampus, and thalamus form a functional circuit crucial for holding and manipulating short-term information. When the timing or quality of communication among these areas breaks down, working memory perish, contributing to the broader cognitive difficulties seen in schizophrenia. The hippocampus and PFC work together to support memory tasks that involve space and time. In rodent models, researchers have shown that these regions synchronise their activity using theta and gamma oscillations. These brain waves help coordinate information flow during decision-making. For instance, during tasks that ask a rodent to remember a spatial cue, theta rhythms from the hippocampus can lock into the firing of neurons in the medial PFC, aligning both regions for accurate choices. This cross-regional alignment seems necessary for encoding and maintaining spatial details. However, this coordination is fragile in schizophrenia. Patients often show weaker connectivity between the hippocampus and PFC, and this is mirrored in rodent models of the disease. Mice genetically engineered to carry risk variants, such as deletions like those found in human 22q11.2 microdeletion syndrome, display poor theta synchrony and struggle with memory tasks. Techniques like optogenetics—which allow scientists to turn off specific neural pathways—

[20] Kupferschmidt, D.A. and Gordon, J.A. (2018). The dynamics of disordered dialogue: Prefrontal, hippocampal and thalamic miscommunication underlying working memory deficits in schizophrenia. Brain and Neuroscience Advances, 2, p.239821281877182. doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/2398212818771821.

have confirmed that interfering with hippocampal signals to the PFC during memory formation leads to performance failures. The thalamus, and particularly its mediodorsal (MD) nucleus, plays another key role. It forms dense connections with the PFC and appears to serve as a switchboard that manages the flow of information. During the memory delay phase, the MD sends inputs to the PFC, helping maintain information. Later, when it is time to act on what was remembered, this flow reverses, with the PFC sending top-down signals back to the thalamus. This bidirectional exchange supports the different stages of memory processing. In schizophrenia, this balance is off. Imaging studies show that the white matter tracts connecting the thalamus and PFC are often degraded in patients, resulting in weaker prefrontal activation and reduced working memory performance. Rodent models using NMDA receptor blockers like ketamine simulate this disconnect, showing disordered oscillatory rhythms and impaired task outcomes. While not all models agree on the precise mechanisms, the evidence points to disrupted timing and coherence in these communication loops as a central issue. Kupferschmidt and Gordon emphasise that future research should continue to investigate how these brain regions coordinate across time and frequency bands. Using refined tools like closed-loop optogenetics and simultaneous recordings across multiple regions could help identify specific patterns of failure. Understanding these network dynamics may eventually allow for targeted treatments that restore proper synchrony and improve cognitive function in those living with schizophrenia.

The miscommunication of deception

In their experimental study 'The miscommunication of deception[21]', Charles F. Bond, Karen Nelson Kahler, and Lucia M. Paolicelli investigate how humans deceive and how that deception is perceived. Their research shows that miscommunication in deception often stems not from a failure to detect lies, but from how deception is performed and interpreted. People tend to rely on visible cues, such as demeanour, to judge honesty. But these same cues are frequently manipulated by liars, resulting in a mismatch between perception and reality. The researchers asked college students to talk about their last job, either truthfully or deceptively, while being videotaped. Later, these recordings were shown to other students, who tried to determine who was lying. Incentives were offered both for successful lying and for correctly identifying lies. The findings revealed a strong bias: some people simply appeared more honest, whether they were telling the truth. Those who gave off an 'honest' impression were more often believed, even when lying. On the other hand, some people looked untrustworthy even when they were telling the truth. This demeanour bias had a stronger effect on judgment than any real ability to detect lies. Interestingly, liars in the study often used more eye contact, hand gestures, and fewer speech hesitations—behaviours that are usually associated with honesty. These deceptive signals often fooled observers. As the authors note, these behaviours do not reliably indicate truth or lies; they simply reflect the liar's skill in crafting a believable image. Some participants even judged others more harshly because they themselves looked honest, projecting their internal sense of trust onto others' appearances. Drawing on evolutionary theory, the authors compare human deception to animal strategies like camouflage or mimicry. Just as certain traits improve survival in the animal kingdom, the ability to deceive effectively may have been rewarded in human evolution. Over time, individuals who were good at lying may have had an advantage in social situations, passing down their skills—directly or indirectly—through generations. This arms race between deception and detection means that the average

[21] Bond, C. F., Kahler, K. N. and Paolicelli, L. M. (2001) 'The miscommunication of deception: An adaptive perspective', Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 80(5), pp. 768–779.

person may be far better at lying than spotting lies. The experiment also revealed that the order in which people lied or told the truth affected judgments. When participants lied after telling the truth, their lies were harder to detect. This suggests that once someone builds trust, they can exploit that trust to deceive more effectively. Liars benefit not only from how they act in the moment but from the credibility they build over time. The study shows that lying is not simply a matter of saying something false. It involves using body language, tone, and timing to shape how others perceive the lie. This can lead to systematic miscommunication, especially when observers rely on superficial cues. The authors argue that liars learn to refine their skills through success, while those who try to detect lies often rely on flawed strategies that go uncorrected. In the theatre of conversation, liars play on a well-lit stage, while truth-tellers stumble in the dark with broken scripts.

Handbook of deceptive communication

In 'The Palgrave Handbook of Deceptive Communication[22]', edited by Tony Docan-Morgan, the chapters by Matthew S. McGlone and Mark L. Knapp, and by Darrin J. Griffin and Christian Bender, trace how deception has been understood and practiced across different times and cultures. The history of lying is not just about identifying falsehoods but about how societies respond to and rationalise deception. McGlone and Knapp begin by outlining how ancient societies viewed lying as both dangerous and inevitable. Texts from India, China, and Greece reveal that physical signs—like appetite changes or shifts in behaviour—were used to detect deception. Religion also played a role. Truth-telling was often enforced through spiritual or physical ordeals, as lying was seen as both a moral and existential threat. With the Renaissance came a shift. Courts and inquisitors turned to more systematic methods. Legal procedures developed that aimed to test credibility through questioning and logic. In politics, deception became more accepted. Machiavelli argued that rulers needed to lie to survive, while others stressed maintaining an honest image in public. Deception, in this view, was not a moral failing but a necessary skill. The Enlightenment and early modern science added new tools to the study of lies. Psychology and physiology led to the polygraph, an early attempt to link bodily responses with truth. At the same time, new philosophical ideas challenged the very notion of absolute truth. As thinkers became more sceptical, the idea of a clear line between true and false became harder to define. More recently, cultural, and technological changes have made deception even more complex. Political scandals, fake news, and digital manipulation have blurred the boundaries between reality and appearance. Today, deception research focuses on how lies are created, interpreted, and socially understood. Scholars study facial expressions, speech patterns, and digital behaviour. But the core challenge remains the same: understanding how people decide when and how to lie. Griffin and Bender take this further by examining deception across cultures. They define culture as a shared system of signs and values. In some cultures, lying to preserve harmony is expected. In others, direct truth is more valued. These cultural differences influence how people lie and how others interpret those lies. Factors like individualism versus collectivism shape motives. In collectivist cultures, people may lie to protect the group. In individualist ones, lies might serve personal goals. Stakes also vary. Small lies, or 'white lies', are common everywhere, but what counts as acceptable varies. Children learn these norms early, and their understanding of lying is shaped by culture. Cultural context also affects how deception is communicated—whether through face-to-face interaction or digital platforms. People often choose less permanent channels, like casual messages, when

[22] Docan-Morgan, T. (ed.) (2019) The Palgrave Handbook of Deceptive Communication. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

trying to deceive. Still, across cultures, people often assume honesty, making them vulnerable to skilled liars. These chapters show that deception is not just a personal act but a social and cultural phenomenon. It reflects what societies value, what they fear, and how they navigate trust and power. In most societies, the cohesion of the community rests less on the open exchange of truths than on the cultivated art of deception, which serves as a unifying linguistic and cultural foundation. Society is a carefully maintained fiction, sustained by the collective agreement to treat its lies as truth.

Deceptive speech

In their analysis 'Deception and Language[23]', David M. Markowitz and Jeffrey T. Hancock argue that the connection between lying, and linguistic expression is far from straightforward. Their proposed Contextual Organisation of Language and Deception (COLD) framework aims to clarify how different factors influence deceptive communication. Instead of assuming that lies leave behind universal language cues, the COLD framework points to context as the decisive element. Deception, they argue, alters language, but the form and extent of this change depend heavily on surrounding circumstances. Deceptive speech often reflects the speaker's psychological state. People under stress or trying to manage impressions may use words differently. Yet, studies have shown contradictory findings. In one case, liars use fewer self-references when discussing emotionally charged topics. In another, fake reviewers use more self-references to appear authentic. These inconsistencies are not flaws in research but indicators of how language adapts based on context. It is not simply that lying changes language; it is that lies are told for different reasons, in different ways, to different audiences. Research supports that language reflects mental states. Depressed individuals write with more negative emotion words. Students who write analytically perform better academically. Deception operates similarly, but the effects are less consistent. Meta-analyses show only moderate linguistic shifts when people lie, and these vary depending on factors such as communication medium, motivation to deceive, and genre. For instance, in face-to-face interviews, liars tend to use fewer words. Online, however, they often use more, to appear more credible. Markowitz and Hancock integrate existing theories like Truth-Default Theory and Interpersonal Deception Theory into their model. Truth-Default Theory suggests that people usually assume others are telling the truth. That bias means lies often go undetected unless something disrupts the assumption—like conflicting evidence or a known motive to lie. Interpersonal Deception Theory adds that social relationships play a role. Familiarity, interaction type, and power dynamics all affect how lies are delivered and received. The COLD framework outlines three main contextual forces: psychological dynamics, pragmatic goals, and genre conventions. Psychological dynamics refer to the speaker's mental state—are they anxious, confident, or under pressure? This can affect how much emotion, or cognitive effort appears in the message. Pragmatic goals relate to the liar's purpose—are they lying to protect themselves, influence policy, or conceal failure? Each goal shapes the tone and content. Finally, genre conventions—rules that govern communication styles—also matter. A lie in a formal email will not look the same as one in a casual text. To illustrate this, the authors examine political lies told by US Presidents. Lies told for policy reasons (e.g., Lyndon Johnson or George W. Bush) often contain fewer self-references and more negative emotion terms. In contrast, lies to cover personal embarrassment (e.g., from Bill Clinton or Richard Nixon) show the opposite

[23] Markowitz, D.M. and Hancock, J.T. (2020) 'Deception and language: The contextual organization of language and deception (COLD) framework', in Docan-Morgan, T. (ed.) The Palgrave Handbook of Deceptive Communication. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 233–255.

pattern. These findings demonstrate that context, not deception alone, dictates linguistic patterns. Deception is not a fixed linguistic fingerprint but a flexible adaptation to the needs of the moment.

Corruption of communication

In 'On the Corruption of Communication: A Theory of Deception[24]' Bambang Sukma Wijaya focuses on how the process of sharing information can be intentionally distorted. His central idea is that corruption in communication happens when messages are shaped not to reveal the truth, but to serve personal or group interests. This kind of manipulation can affect what is said, how it is delivered, in what setting it occurs, and the ethics of the speaker's behaviour. The act of communication is rooted in human needs—people speak to survive, connect, and achieve goals. But because language holds power, it can also be used to mislead. Political figures, for example, might produce misleading slogans to influence public opinion, while corporations can issue false statements that risk public safety. These are not just examples of poor communication, but forms of deception that erode the audience's right to truth. Wijaya breaks communication corruption into four main categories. The first is the message itself. Language is often altered to hide or distort facts. Whether through disinformation, fake news, or selectively edited content, these distortions are crafted to influence thought and action. Such corruption does not just mislead—it rewrites reality. The second is media corruption. This occurs both on an individual level and within entire institutions. Journalists with conflicts of interest may slant a story, but more dangerous is systemic manipulation. When powerful actors control media platforms, news becomes a tool for shaping public narratives, often at the cost of accuracy. Third, Wijaya examines how communicative context can be corrupted. The context includes physical, social, and cultural elements that give meaning to language. When politicians stage events or curate specific settings to build false impressions, they are not just manipulating facts—they are manufacturing reality. The audience interprets the message within that context, and if it is manipulated, so is understanding. The fourth form of corruption is behavioural. Communicators may act unethically—through plagiarism, bribery, or impersonation—to deceive an audience. These behaviours often go unnoticed, but their impact is significant. They help establish false authority, shape public opinion, and mask wrongdoing under a facade of credibility. To describe how these elements work together, Wijaya proposes a formula: Communication corruption increases with higher needs, power, and opportunity , and decreases with stronger audience rights , conscience , and moral responsibility. In simple terms, the more power and motivation a speaker must deceive—and the fewer moral constraints or audience protections in place—the more likely corruption will occur. At its core, this theory links deception directly to communicative behaviour. Lies, omissions, and distortions are all strategies for corrupting meaning. From political campaigns to advertising, deception is often embedded in public discourse, subtly reshaping what audiences believe. Understanding these dynamics is essential. Communication corruption is not only about lying—it is about systematically weakening the structures that allow people to seek and share the truth.

[24] Wijaya, B.S. (2020) 'On the Corruption of Communication: A Theory of Deception', in Docan-Morgan, T. (ed.) The Palgrave Handbook of Deceptive Communication. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 79–99.

Not all lies are spontaneous

In the study 'Not All Lies Are Spontaneous: An Examination of Deception Across Different Modes of Communication[25]', Monica T. Whitty and her colleagues explore how people lie across different forms of communication. Using an online diary method, the team gathered insights from 104 participants, seventy-six of whom kept daily diaries over the course of a week. These diaries recorded when lies occurred, the nature of each lie, its level of planning, its seriousness, and the communication channel used. The researchers found that people were most likely to lie during telephone conversations. About 13% of phone interactions involved deception, compared to 8% in face-to-face exchanges. Lies were less common in text-based digital media like email, instant messaging, and social media. These results align with what is called the feature-based model. This model predicts that certain features of communication—like how fast a conversation happens, whether it is recorded, and whether messages reach many people at once—affect how likely people are to lie. A second important finding was that not all lies are spontaneous. While many lies happened on the spot, a large number—especially those in text messages—were premeditated. These planned lies tended to be more serious. The time delay offered by asynchronous media like SMS gave participants space to craft more deliberate, calculated deceptions. Another pattern involved the purpose of lying. Most lies were self-serving. People lied to protect themselves, boost their image, or avoid trouble. Interestingly, participants reported telling more lies to people to whom they were close. This may seem counterintuitive, but researchers suggest that people lie more in close relationships because they care about maintaining harmony or avoiding conflict. At the same time, participants also admitted to lying to strangers, likely because they felt less accountability and assumed they would never meet them again. The research evaluated predictions from three different theories: social distance theory, media richness theory, and the feature-based model. While social distance theory suggests people are more honest in close relationships, and media richness theory emphasises the ability of a channel to convey nuance, the feature-based model provided the best explanation overall. Still, the study showed that this model could benefit from updates—especially in distinguishing between planned and spontaneous lies and recognising that instant messaging, though digital, can function like real-time conversation. The study offers a nuanced view of deception. The mode of communication matters. Phone calls invite more deception than text, and asynchronous formats allow for greater planning. People lie to serve their own interests more than to help others, and relationships—whether close or distant—shape how and when lies are told. As miscommunication continues to evolve, particularly through digital channels, these findings open the door for further study of how technology influences the nature of deception. The paradox is that the most reliable knowledge about language comes from studying its failures—deception and miscommunication—rather than its ideal forms. Like medicine's maxim "First, do no harm," the study of mass miscommunication should aim not at perfecting speech, but at understanding and mitigating its inevitable distortions.

Accepting the Miscommunication Axiom

The paradigm of miscommunication treats misunderstanding as an inherent condition of communication, beyond the need for empirical proof. The miscommunication axiom is not a mathematical theorem to be proven or disproven, but a paradigm—a way of thinking that individuals or groups may accept or reject. Unlike scientific postulates tested by experiment,

[25] Whitty, M.T., Buchanan, T., Joinson, A.N. and Meredith, A. (2012) 'Not All Lies Are Spontaneous: An Examination of Deception Across Different Modes of Communication', The Palgrave Handbook of Deceptive Communication, ed. T. Docan-Morgan. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 303–322.

such an axiom functions as a conceptual lens, framing how one understands the inevitability of misunderstanding in human interaction. It holds that as population and linguistic complexity grow, so too does semantic entropy, amplifying confusion and reducing clarity. Its validity depends not on empirical proof but on whether people find it a compelling description of reality. As with Paul Watzlawick's axioms, it serves as a foundational truth for those who adopt it, shaping how they interpret communication in complex, fragmented societies. Language evolves through the principle of difference: every new word, rule, or meaning must distinguish itself from what came before. A is A precisely because it is not B; novelty depends on contrast. Meanings evolve with context, power, and bias, often privileging one side of a binary. This instability ensures that understanding is provisional, and interpretation remains a continual process, where every definition is haunted by the shadow of its opposite. Each term carries a trace of what it excludes—present yet absent, shaped by history but understood in the present. Jacques Derrida's concept of 'différance' captures this dynamic—meaning emerges through both differing from and deferring to other signs, never fixed but always in flux. Languages, cultures, religions, identities, and nations live by the same law as words: they are what they are because they are not something else. French is not German, Islam is not Christianity, the Republic is not the Empire. Every collective identity carries the ghost of its opposite, a shadow that shapes its form and gives it meaning. Meaning is born in the gap, always deferred, never fully captured. History reshuffles these contrasts: the enemy becomes an ally, the heresy becomes a tradition, the border shifts but still marks a line between "us" and "them." Dominance creeps into the hierarchy, making one side seem pure, original, superior, while the other is cast as derivative or impure. Yet without its opposite, no identity can survive; its self-image needs a foil. Nations tell myths not just of who they are, but of who they are not. Languages coin words to name the foreign, the strange, the other. And so the trace remains—an invisible watermark running through every anthem, prayer, and proverb—reminding us that what we call "ours" is inseparable from what we exclude, and that identity is never more than a story told against its own shadow. This constant push for linguistic innovation ensures vitality, but it also generates an inevitable phase of obfuscation. New forms disrupt the stability of shared meaning until they are adopted as part of the accepted system. Thus, the very process that drives language forward—creating distinctions—also guarantees miscommunication during transition. In mass communication, this principle operates at scale: to keep language alive, the old must be unsettled, renamed, and reframed. Novelty thrives on the temporary breakdown of clarity, turning misunderstanding into a bridge toward future consensus. In this sense, miscommunication is not a flaw but the engine of linguistic evolution, the unavoidable turbulence through which new meanings are born. To innovate in language is to destabilize the known, to obscure the familiar just enough for something different to emerge—and in doing so, to accept that confusion is the price of renewal. What follows the decay of language? Novelty and the revitalisation of language (and culture) demand obfuscation at any price, even if it means embracing shallowness, absurdity, and broken logic. What seems like decay in clarity is often the fertile confusion from which new meanings, forms, and identities take root.

2. LYING

2.1.Why we lie?

(Truth's shadow: Why humans are wired to deceive)

'The capacity to lie is a talent for fiction, and the talent for fiction is a sign of civilisation'.

— Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own

'Lying is a cooperative act. A lie has no power by its mere utterance; its power emerges when someone else agrees to believe it'.

— Pamela Meyer, Liespotting

Evolutionary roots of lying

Lying is something people do without much thought. But why do we lie so easily? According to David Livingstone Smith in 'Why We Lie: The Evolutionary Roots of Deception and the Unconscious Mind[26]', the answer lies deep in our evolutionary past. In his book, he argues that deception is not just a human flaw—it is a survival tool shaped by natural selection. Just as animals camouflage themselves or pretend to be more dangerous than they are, humans developed more sophisticated ways to deceive. Speech, facial expressions, and even body language became tools not just for connection but for manipulation. Smith explains that lying helped early humans manage their social lives. In small groups, reputation mattered. Being able to lie—and lie well—could mean the difference between acceptance and rejection. Over time, humans became experts at not only lying to others but lying to themselves. This might sound strange, but it makes sense. If a person believes their own lies, they become more convincing to others. That is what Smith calls self-deception, and it is one of the most powerful traits people carry without realising it. Much of this happens unconsciously. Freud introduced the idea of the unconscious, but modern science has expanded it. Cognitive research now shows that much of our thinking happens beneath awareness. People make decisions, form beliefs, and rationalise behaviour without knowing why. This hidden part of the mind works like a backstage crew, shaping thoughts, words, and actions while the conscious mind takes the spotlight. Smith calls this system a 'Machiavellian module'—a kind of inner strategist that manages social life through subtle forms of deception. Smith also points out that humans are natural storytellers. We use language not just to describe the world but to frame it, bend it, and sometimes obscure it. Metaphors, jokes, polite deflections—all are forms of soft deception that grease the wheels of human interaction. These habits are not necessarily harmful. In fact, they often help people function in polite society. A harsh truth spoken at the wrong time can be more damaging than a gentle lie. The book draws on examples from nature, neuroscience, and psychology to make its case. One story involves a young baboon who cries out to attract help, only to steal food once the helper chases a rival away. This kind of deception is not unique to humans, but we have turned it into an art form. From fake smiles to false modesty, our daily lives are filled with behaviours that distort the truth in small, socially acceptable ways. Smith's argument is not that people are bad because they lie. It is that lying is part of being human. It is a strategy built into our minds, one that helped our ancestors survive. Even today, lying helps people navigate a world where too much honesty can be risky.

Why do kids lie?

Children lie. They start young, and they do it for all sorts of reasons. 'In 'Why Kids Lie: How Parents Can Encourage Truthfulness[27]', Paul Ekman, along with Mary Ann Mason Ekman and Tom Ekman, explores the many faces of dishonesty in childhood. How should a parent react when a child lies, especially when it feels personal? He should explain why trust matters.

[26] Smith, D. L. (2004) Why We Lie: The Evolutionary Roots of Deception and the Unconscious Mind. New York: St. Martin's Press.
[27] Ekman, P. (1991) Why Kids Lie: How Parents Can Encourage Truthfulness. New York: Scribner.

When a child lies, it can make a parent feel betrayed, angry, or even like a failure. But reacting in anger can make things worse. Ekman argues that the real goal should be understanding the motive behind the lie. Often, kids lie to avoid punishment, to protect someone else, or just because they think it is easier than telling the truth. Recognising the reason behind the lie gives parents a better chance to respond in a way that encourages honesty rather than more deception. The book explains that not all lies are the same. Some are bold and obvious. Others are subtle—like hiding part of the truth. Ekman points out that even young children know concealment can count as lying. When asked about a story where a child stays silent after breaking something, most children agree that the silence is still dishonest. That awareness matters because it shows children have an early sense of morality and consequences. Another key point is how much children watch and imitate their parents. If a parent lies on the phone to avoid a dinner invitation or exaggerates on a resume, children notice that. Ekman warns that even small everyday lies, when repeated, can shape a child's understanding of truth. Modeling honesty is more powerful than any lecture. Cheating is another form of lying that Ekman explores. He shares that many students admit to it—even at a young age. Cheating, he argues, is not just about breaking rules; it is about hiding effort and misrepresenting oneself. And just like with other lies, the reasons vary—fear of failure, pressure to succeed, or even a belief that everyone else is doing it. Ekman does not offer quick fixes. Instead, he calls for patience, clarity, and consistency. He urges parents to create homes where telling the truth feels safe, even when the truth is hard. By avoiding harsh punishments and staying open to difficult conversations, parents can make honesty a more attractive choice.

Many faces of lying

In 'The Philosophy of Lying[28]' (2018), Clancy Bennett explores the ethical, linguistic, and psychological dimensions of lying, examining what distinguishes lies from other forms of deception and why truthfulness matters in both personal and social contexts. Lying is the act of saying something one knows to be false, with the aim of making someone else believe it. While it may resemble other forms of speech that stretch or twist the truth—like metaphor, irony, or exaggeration—it is distinct in its intent to deceive. It is a calculated act, even if sometimes automatic or habitual. Lies are not always told for selfish reasons. They can serve many ends: to avoid punishment, to gain advantage, to protect feelings, or to maintain social harmony. Lies come in many forms. A barefaced lie is openly false and unashamed. A big lie is so absurd it relies on people not believing anyone would dare make it up. Black lies are selfish and harmful, while blue lies support a group at the expense of the truth. A fib is a small and usually harmless untruth. Fraud and perjury, by contrast, are lies with legal consequences. Some forms of deception blur the line. Bullshitting, for instance, does not care whether something is true or false—it only wants to sound good. Paltering sticks to the truth technically but frames it in a way that misleads. Lies of omission hold back important facts. Then there are therapeutic fibs told to people with dementia, or polite lies meant to avoid hurting someone's feelings. Disinformation is more organised. It spreads falsehoods deliberately, often through media, to manipulate public opinion. In contrast, confabulation is when someone makes false statements believing they are true—commonly seen in brain injury cases. Lying can even be expected, as in poker or espionage. Philosophers have long debated whether any kind of lie is ever justified. Some say it depends on the results. Others argue that lying is always wrong because it distorts language's purpose: to share truth. Culture is full of lies, from innocent childhood tales to powerful political myths. The famous 'memory hole' from George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-

[28] Bennett, C. (2018) The Philosophy of Lying. London: Routledge.

Four captures the terrifying potential of state-sanctioned lies: erasing the past to control the present. Even animals lie. Evolution seems to have selected for the ability to mislead, even in creatures that cannot speak. From harmless exaggerations to systemic misinformation, lying shapes daily life and political realities. It is both a survival tool and a social threat. Ethical views differ, but its consequences are real: broken trust, fractured relationships, and societies where nothing can be believed. Whether to protect, manipulate, or entertain, lying reveals the tension between truth and the human need to control perception.

Saying the 'thing which is not'

The article 'Saying, and Hearing, the 'Thing Which Is Not'[29]' by Hal McDonaldin, explores the cognitive and emotional complexities of lying and being lied to. It examines how humans process falsehoods, both as speakers and listeners, and how deception affects memory, trust, and psychological well-being. For humans, lying, joking, and speaking ironically are all part of everyday communication. The strangeness lies not in doing it, but in how easily it is done. Modern neuroscience now confirms what the Houyhnhnms sensed: saying or understanding things that are not literally true requires serious mental effort. In fact, the human brain performs a kind of cognitive acrobatics each time it processes a deceptive or ironic remark. Understanding the literal meaning of a sentence is one thing; grasping what a speaker means when the words say something else is something else entirely. The study 'Neural correlates underlying the comprehension of deceitful and ironic communicative intentions[30]' from the University of Turin tested how the brain reacts to different types of non-literal speech—specifically deceit and irony. Participants read short stories, each ending with a target sentence that, depending on the setup, was either honest, deceitful, ironic, or nonsense. Brain scans showed that both lies, and irony activated overlapping brain regions—specifically, the left inferior frontal gyrus, the middle frontal gyrus, and the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex. These areas help manage complex thought, working memory, and decision-making. But when people processed irony, a different region lit up too: the left middle temporal gyrus. This area seems to help us recognise when someone is not just being untruthful but wants us to notice the untruth—and understand something deeper through that shared awareness. Irony, then, demands an extra layer of mental engagement. It is not just about spotting a contradiction. It is about inferring intent. The speaker means for the listener to realise that the words are false and to interpret the real message from that falsehood. It is a type of communication that depends on trust, context, and a mutual understanding of subtext. So, when humans say, 'the thing which is not', it is not always a lie. Sometimes it is irony. Sometimes it is sarcasm. Sometimes it is a joke. The intention matters. And grasping that intention calls on complex cognitive systems. Swift's fiction captured a truth that science now confirms: the ability to say and understand what is not literally true is a mark of advanced cognition. It allows for persuasion, storytelling, humor, and subtlety. In the end, it is what makes human language far more than a set of signals—it makes it an art of meaning-making, shaped not just by facts but by imagination, empathy, and shared understanding.

[29] Psychology Today. (2018). Saying, and Hearing, the 'Thing Which Is Not'. [online] Available at: https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/time-travelling-apollo/201802/saying-and-hearing-the-thing-which-is-not [Accessed 23 Jul. 2025].

[30] Bosco, F. M., Parola, A., Valentini, M. C., & Morese, R. (2017). Neural correlates underlying the comprehension of deceitful and ironic communicative intentions. Cortex; a journal devoted to the study of the nervous system and behaviour, 94, 73–86. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cortex.2017.06.010

Descartes's Demon

In 'Descartes's Demon[31]', David Livingstone Smith explores the unsettling idea that much of human thought is shaped by self-deception, illusion, and cognitive distortion. He examines how the mind can be its own deceiver, generating comforting fictions that shield people from uncomfortable truths about themselves and the world. In the 17th century, René Descartes imagined a demon—an all-powerful trickster whose sole aim was to deceive him. This demon planted false thoughts, manipulated evidence, and made Descartes doubt even his own senses. In response, Descartes decided to reject anything that could possibly be false, holding on only to what was certain. Eventually, though, he leaned on his faith in a benevolent God to resolve his doubts. In doing so, he backed away from the full implications of the demon's power. David Livingstone Smith revisits this thought experiment and argues that Descartes did not go far enough. The real demon, he says, is not some external trickster. It is inside us. It is the part of the human mind that hides truth from itself. This internal deceiver is not malicious—it evolved. For most of our species' history, people lived in small, tight-knit groups. In those environments, self-deception often helped. Believing one's own lies made it easier to lie convincingly to others. Thinking well of oneself, even when undeserved, made a person more confident, persuasive, and socially successful. But what once worked to help individuals survive now causes harm. In today's complex, globalised world, the same mental habits that kept our ancestors bonded in tribes lead us toward conflict, division, and dangerous oversimplifications. Smith points to patriotism, religious zeal, and moral crusades as examples of how shared illusions can spiral into hostility. People wrap themselves in beliefs that feel noble or true but often shield them from uncomfortable facts. These beliefs are not just personal; they become collective, reinforced by rituals, stories, and symbols. Smith suggests that while we cannot fully escape self-deception, we do not have to pass it on. Instead of teaching myths that glorify our nation or identity, we can teach honest history. We can challenge blind loyalty and encourage scepticism toward manipulative narratives. He calls this a kind of psychological vaccination—a way to strengthen the mind against seductive falsehoods, even if it remains vulnerable. One reason self-deception is so difficult to shake, Smith argues, is because of how the mind works. Freud once said most of what we think goes on outside our awareness. Modern research agrees. We often do not know why we do what we do, yet we believe we understand ourselves clearly. Meanwhile, we are quick to judge others and often do so accurately. This odd contrast—inner blindness and outward insight—stems from evolution. It gave us minds tuned to social life, capable of reading others but protecting us from our own truths. If we want to reduce the harm that comes from self-deception, Smith says, we need to face this inner demon. We need to understand how our minds hide from reality and why. That means questioning comforting stories, resisting easy moral certainties, and staying open to unsettling truths.

Scout mindset

Some people see the world as it is. Others, often without realising it, shape their view around what they want to believe. In 'The Scout Mindset: Why Some People See Things Clearly and Others Don't [32]', Julia Galef explores what separates these two ways of thinking. She argues that being a good thinker is not just about having knowledge or intelligence. It is about adopting a mindset that favours clarity over comfort—a mindset that values truth even when it is

[31] Smith, D. L. (2007) Descartes's Demon. In Why We Lie: The Evolutionary Roots of Deception and the Unconscious Mind. New York: St. Martin's Press.
[32] Galef, J. (2021) The Scout Mindset: Why Some People See Things Clearly and Others Don't. New York: Portfolio.

uncomfortable. This is what she calls the scout mindset. Galef contrasts the scout mindset with what she calls the soldier mindset. The soldier mindset is defensive. It works to protect beliefs that feel good or serve social needs. It resists criticism and rejects evidence that might undermine a favoured idea. Scouts, on the other hand, are curious. They ask, 'What's actually true?' even if the answer is threatening. This attitude allows scouts to recognise mistakes, question assumptions, and change their minds when necessary. This difference matters more than people think. The soldier mindset can offer quick relief: it props up confidence, avoids conflict, and shields the ego. But it has long-term costs. It can lead to poor decisions, missed opportunities, and broken trust. Self-deception may help someone avoid discomfort in the moment, but it often makes life harder down the line. Galef shares examples of individuals who thrive because they embrace the scout mindset. Entrepreneurs who assess their odds realistically are better prepared for setbacks. Activists who acknowledge hard truths can build more effective campaigns. Even those facing personal crises—like being lost at sea or facing a terminal diagnosis—do better when they face reality directly. The key is not to be negative. It is to be honest. With honesty comes a clearer understanding of risks, goals, and possibilities. The scout mindset does not come naturally. It takes effort to catch yourself when you are bending the truth to feel better. Galef suggests practical techniques to train this habit: thought experiments, confidence estimates, and mentally rehearsing how you would respond to being wrong. Over time, these practices make it easier to notice bias and make better judgments. Galef also pushes back on the idea that self-deception is necessary for happiness. While some studies claim that people with 'positive illusions' are happier, the evidence is mixed. She argues that real optimism does not come from ignoring problems—it comes from confronting them constructively. You can be hopeful and realistic at the same time. In fact, the ability to face reality honestly can build the kind of emotional strength that lasts longer than false reassurance. The scout mindset will not eliminate fear or doubt. But it gives people a better way to handle them. By favouring accuracy over defensiveness, it leads to smarter decisions, stronger relationships, and a more grounded sense of confidence.

The dawn of language

The origins of language remain one of the most intriguing puzzles in human history. In 'The Dawn of Language: How We Came to Talk[33]', Sverker Johansson surveys a wide range of ideas about how language might have begun, what form it took, and what its early uses were. He challenges the assumption that speech was the first and only form of human communication. Some theories propose that our ancestors started with an inner 'mentalese', a kind of silent cognitive language, while others suggest that gesture-based systems, like early sign language, were our first tools of expression. Chomsky's influential view sees language as a mental tool that emerged before it was used for communication. According to this model, a genetic mutation created a 'grammar engine' that allowed for complex thought. Only later did humans realise they could share these thoughts externally. But Johansson points out the issues with this view: how would such a system develop without external interaction, and why would internal language mirror the sequential patterns of speech? An older but still compelling theory holds that sign language came first. Humans gesture naturally, often without realising it. Babies sign before they speak. People even move their hands while talking on the phone. Despite this, most communities transitioned from signing to speech. Johansson suggests that early language probably included both gesture and vocalisation. Over time, cultural and social pressures

[33] Johansson, S. (2021) The Dawn of Language: How We Came to Talk. Translated by Frank Perry. London: Macmillan.

nudged most human groups toward speech as the dominant form. When it comes to actual sounds, language appears to have developed not from design but from use. Humans have flexible vocal tracts capable of producing a wide range of sounds, but each language selects only a subset. Research indicates that these choices emerge through interaction. People unconsciously adapt their speech to be more understandable, resulting in stable systems of vowels and consonants. This dynamic, grounded in mutual intelligibility, explains how spoken language became structured and consistent. But what were people talking about in the beginning? Some theories focus on cooperation: scavenging parties signalling about the location of carrion or dangers en route. Others point to teaching—explaining how to make tools—or storytelling, which fosters social cohesion and passes down knowledge. Music also enters the debate. Darwin speculated that singing preceded speech, a view that reappears in theories of a musical proto language. Yet music, while emotionally powerful, lacks the structured meaning that defines language. Johansson also explores how language might have supported social strategies. Among chimpanzees, alliances form through grooming and quiet coordination. Humans may have replaced this with 'grooming talk'—gossip and small talk that bind large groups. Language also allows for manipulation. It helps shape others' perceptions, as when new parents talk about a baby's resemblance to its father. In this view, language evolved not just to share information, but to guide thought, reinforce bonds, and secure influence. Johansson concludes that language did not start with a single spark. Instead, it emerged gradually from a mix of cognitive advances, ecological needs, and social functions. It began as a blend of signs, vocalisations, and imitation. Through repeated use, these became more abstract and flexible, allowing humans to cooperate, instruct, bond, and persuade as no other species can.

Language as a tool of lie

In 'Human Language as a Tool of Lie[34]' Constantinos Maritsas offers an unconventional view on the origins and function of human language. He argues that language did not emerge merely for communication, but rather as a strategy—specifically, a deceptive one. His idea is rooted in Darwinian theory. For Maritsas, men developed language to describe their supposed heroic actions. The purpose? To gain the favour of women and secure reproductive success. In other words, lying was built into language from the very beginning. The primal lie, he says, is something like 'I killed the bear', said not by the man who did it, but by one who watched from a distance. This was not just boasting. It was survival. Language gave weaker men a tool to compete with stronger ones—not through action, but through narrative. Maritsas defines the lie as 'someone else's truth'. The sentence carries weight. It suggests that language distorts reality as much as it reflects it. In this view, civilisation itself is not a product of the fittest surviving, but rather of the most persuasive. Maritsas replaces 'natural selection' with what he calls 'civilisational selection'. The traits that flourish are not brute strength or raw intelligence, but the ability to craft appealing stories. This reframing challenges common views of progress and achievement. What if civilisation rewards not those who do, but those who speak best about what they (or others) did? Maritsas breaks language into two streams: poetry and prose. Poetry, he suggests, originated with men. It was a way to elevate everyday acts into epic deeds. Poetry, in this sense, was not just art but advertising—heroic marketing aimed at winning attention and affection. Prose, on the other hand, developed later when women adopted language for practical

[34] Maritsas, C. (2010). Human Language as a Tool of Lie. Cultura International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology, 7(2), pp.234–244. doi:https://doi.org/10.5840/cultura20107217.

purposes. While poetry glorifies, prose organises. One dramatises; the other manages. Syntax and grammar, he argues, emerged to support this narrative function. It was not enough to gesture or make sounds. To lie convincingly, one needed structure. Stories required order—who did what to whom, when, and how. As syntax developed, it allowed for more elaborate storytelling. Maritsas points to experiments with dolphins, showing how different word orders change meaning. Human language did the same, but with far greater subtlety and consequence. The main thesis remains sharp: lying is not an unfortunate misuse of language—it is its origin. Every sentence carries the potential for deception. The more polished the language, the more powerful the lie. According to Maritsas, this makes language not just a tool of coordination or expression, but a weapon. And like all weapons, it can be used wisely or recklessly. In the end, he calls for a kind of awareness. If language was born to deceive, people must remain alert to its influence. Understanding how words shape perception is the first step to resisting manipulation. The challenge is not to abandon language, but to use it with care. Because if every lie is built on a structure of words, then every truth must learn to live there too.

Born liars

All humans who use language lie. Not just occasionally, not only under pressure, but as part of everyday life. In 'Born Liars: Why We Can't Live Without Deceit [35]', Ian Leslie explores the idea that deception is not a flaw in human nature, but one of its defining features. Lying is not something that emerged as an unfortunate consequence of society—it is a tool shaped by evolution, honed by the demands of social living, and woven into our intelligence. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his Discourse on the Origins of Inequality, offers a compelling theory for the rise of deception. He argues that early humans, originally solitary and content, became social beings. As people formed families, then communities, they developed language, tools, and agriculture. These advances led to the concept of private property, which in turn demanded systems of law and justice. But once people had something to lose—and others had something to envy—truth became negotiable. Inequality bred fear, pride, and ultimately, lies. With this shift came a divide between being and appearing. People began to worry more about how they were perceived than who they really were. Rousseau saw this as the beginning of corruption. A society that rewards appearances over honesty creates conditions where lying becomes not only common, but necessary. Rousseau did not argue that lying was always immoral. In his Reveries of the Solitary Walker, he claimed that not all truths are equal. Some truths can harm, some are neutral, and some lies can even serve justice. He believed in sincerity—but a sincerity that came from within, not one imposed by rigid social rules. Where Rousseau saw complexity, Immanuel Kant drew hard lines. For Kant, lying was always wrong. In On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy, he writes that deception undermines trust, which is essential to human reason and communication. Allowing lies, even for good reasons, destroys the very ground of morality. If everyone lied when it felt justified, then truth would lose its value. For Kant, truth-telling is not about consequences—it is about respecting others as rational beings. Ian Leslie picks up this tension and broadens the frame. He points out that deception is not only moral or immoral—it is also biological. Research in primatology shows that the most socially intelligent animals are also the most deceptive. Chimps hide food, mislead rivals, and even fake injuries. The more complex the social group, the more cunning the individuals. Richard Byrne and Andrew Whiten's studies reveal that deception is linked to brain development. The smarter the animal, the more likely it is to lie. Human children begin to lie as soon as they develop theory of mind—the ability to imagine what someone else knows or believes. This typically starts around age

[35] Reference: Leslie, I. (2011) Born Liars: Why We Can't Live Without Deceit. Quercus.

three. Far from being a sign of moral failure, lying is a milestone of cognitive growth. It shows that a child can see beyond their own perspective. Leslie argues that this link between lying, and intelligence continues into adulthood. To lie well requires empathy, imagination, memory, and self-control. Culture also plays a role. In many societies, especially those that value politeness and social harmony, deception is not only tolerated but expected. White lies smooth over awkward moments. Flattery builds relationships. Even silence can be a form of concealment. These everyday forms of dishonesty do not stem from malice. They reflect the human need to belong, to avoid conflict, and to shape social reality.

Trust me, I am lying

In today's media environment, lies do not just spread—they are built into the system. Ryan Holiday, in his book 'Trust Me, I'm Lying: Confessions of a Media Manipulator[36]', lays bare the machinery behind online news and shows how easily it can be manipulated. As a former media strategist, Holiday admits to using this system to his advantage, creating headlines, fake outrage, and viral stories for clients. His main point is unsettling: the modern media economy is not broken—it works exactly as it was designed to. And that design rewards deception. Blogs and digital news sites run on attention. They do not get paid for being accurate; they get paid when people click. That simple fact changes everything. Writers and editors are under pressure to produce content quickly, to chase what's trending, and to grab attention by any means necessary. Truth becomes secondary if it matters at all. A story does not need to be true to go viral—it just needs to provoke a reaction. Outrage, curiosity, fear, and scandal are the tools of the trade. Once a piece gets enough traction, it spreads to other outlets, often without anyone fact-checking the original source. Corrections, if they come at all, are buried or ignored. By then, the damage is done. People believe what they read, even when it has been proven false later. Holiday explains how easy it is to exploit this system. He describes planting fake stories, manipulating blog writers, and watching as false narratives made their way up the media chain—from obscure blogs to national news. This is not just a one-off trick. It is the standard operating procedure for marketing firms, political campaigns, and even some journalists. The media has become a game of influence, not information. The problem is not only with the people producing the news. It is also with those consuming it. Readers share articles without reading them. Outrage spreads faster than curiosity. The more sensational the story, the more attention it gets, which means more ad revenue for publishers. This creates a feedback loop where the worst content gets rewarded, and thoughtful reporting gets ignored. Holiday argues that the system is beyond repair. It is not just a few bad actors or a couple of rogue blogs. The entire structure incentivises dishonesty. Even the people who built it, like Nick Denton of Gawker, have expressed regret. But regret does not undo the damage. So, what can be done? Holiday does not offer easy answers. He suggests that readers must change their behaviour. Stop clicking on rubbish. Stop sharing before thinking. Demand better from the platforms and outlets that shape public conversation. If people reward honesty and depth instead of outrage and spectacle, media companies will have to adapt. But until that shift happens, the truth will continue to lose out to the loudest lie.

Everybody lies

In 2016, political analysts were confident that Donald Trump would fail. His crude language, unfiltered remarks, and polarising views seemed too extreme for voters. Most polls reinforced this belief. Yet, Trump not only won the Republican nomination but also the

[36] Holiday, R. (2013) Trust Me, I'm Lying: Confessions of a Media Manipulator. New York: Portfolio.

presidency. In ' Everybody Lies: Big Data, New Data, and What the Internet Can Tell Us About Who We Really Are.[37]' Seth Stephens-Davidowitz, a data scientist and former Google data analyst, saw something others missed. He looked not at what people said, but at what they searched. The idea that people lie in public but tell the truth in private is old. What is new is the scale at which this can now be measured. Google searches reveal what surveys often conceal. Online, people type in their fears, prejudices, desires, and insecurities without filters. Stephens-Davidowitz used this data to uncover patterns that traditional polls missed. His interest began during the 2008 election. Barack Obama's victory was hailed as a sign that America had moved past its racial history. Surveys showed that most people did not care about Obama's race. But when Stephens-Davidowitz examined Google Trends, he found disturbing results. Racist searches were frequent and widespread, particularly in areas where Obama underperformed relative to expectations. This hidden bias, invisible in public discourse, suggested that racism was still alive—and influential. Google data does not just reveal racism. It exposes discrepancies across many areas. Surveys claim men and women use condoms equally. Google searches tell a different story. People claim to be happy in marriage yet search for signs of cheating or marital regret. These quiet confessions show that people often present a curated version of themselves in surveys and on social media, while their true concerns lie elsewhere. A separate study of newspaper language shows that conservative outlets used words like 'homosexuals', while liberal ones used 'same-sex couples'. This language choice aligned more with readers' politics than with editorial stance, showing how media often reflects audience beliefs. With digital archives and algorithms, researchers can now track how language reveals political leanings over time. Big Data even offers insight into romantic behaviour. Analysing dating conversations, researchers found patterns: men show interest by making jokes and keeping a steady tone; women use more pitch variation and self-references. Text can predict if people will go on a second date. It can even suggest which marriages might succeed. Still, Big Data is not always truth. Social media, especially Facebook, is a stage. People share what they want others to see. Online, people do not reveal what they consume; they reveal what they want others to think they consume. Stephens-Davidowitz argues that we now live in an age where words are data. The internet has become the world's largest unintentional psychological study. Our clicks, searches, and posts form a map of our inner world. The challenge is not just collecting this data but interpreting it responsibly. Big Data will not solve all problems. But it can expose what people really think, even when they will not admit it. This dual nature of Big Data—its capacity to liberate and control—makes it both promising and dangerous. On one hand, it reveals patterns hidden in plain sight. On the other, it allows quiet forms of discrimination. When language, browsing habits, and preferences are mined for clues, people become vulnerable to systems that reward predictability over fairness. Algorithms do not just measure the world; they shape it. Who gets hired, who gets a loan, and who gets charged more are increasingly data-driven decisions. But behind each number is a person who may never know how they were judged. If everyone lies, then the real power belongs to those whose lies others repeat as truth. In this sense, the most dangerous authority is not the one that enforces rules, but the one that convinces the world to believe what it knows is false. As Senator Roark says in 'Sin City' (2005), "Power comes from lying… Once everyone agrees with what they know isn't true, you've got 'em by the balls."

[37] Stephens-Davidowitz, S. (2017) Everybody Lies: Big Data, New Data, and What the Internet Can Tell Us About Who We Really Are. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

How many people finish books?

In the age of information, books still hold symbolic power—but not always the substance. Many people claim to have read books they have not, turning reading into a performance rather than a practice. A survey marking World Book Day revealed that 61% of British respondents admitted to lying about having read at least one book, often to appear more intelligent or cultured. Orwell's '1984' was the most falsely claimed read, with 42% of people pretending they had completed it. Other revered titles like 'War and Peace' (31%), 'Ulysses' (25%), and even the Bible (24%) followed. Despite their public claims, readers often preferred the work of more accessible authors such as J.K. Rowling and John Grisham—names they were less inclined to confess in surveys. This phenomenon is not limited to what people say, it is also reflected in their behaviour. Amazon Kindle data has shown stark differences in book completion rates: while more than 90% of users finished Donna Tartt's 'The Goldfinch', only 7% completed Daniel Kahneman's 'Thinking, Fast and Slow'. These numbers expose the tension between cultural aspiration and actual engagement. Books become cultural signifiers, social badges worn to impress, even as the content itself remains unread. The result is the rise of what might be called 'pseudo-reading'—a practice where people surround themselves with the aura of literature without the labour of finishing it. But the consequences of this behaviour extend beyond literary embarrassment. In the digital age, pseudo-reading is no longer just a private act of bluffing—it is data. Every unfinished eBook, every falsely marked 'read' in a social profile, every tweet praising a classic never opened becomes part of a vast pool of information about public taste, identity, and behaviour. This data is harvested, analysed, and monetised by platforms and algorithms, shaping everything from publishing trends to political messaging. Seth Stephens-Davidowitz, in 'Everybody Lies', originally hoped Big Data might lead him to personal insight or even love. Instead, he discovered that Big Data has begun transforming social science into something resembling a hard science. By analysing online behaviour—including reading patterns—researchers can now test hypotheses about identity, aspiration, and deception with remarkable precision. Social scientists are no longer limited to interviews or broad surveys; they can track the granular habits of millions. This shift has important implications. With data from e-readers, search engines, and social media, researchers can distinguish between what people say they do and what they do. They can observe how often people open difficult texts, where they stop reading, and how they share or comment on books they have never finished. Corporations and political strategists exploit this gap between image and behaviour. Book preferences become marketing tools, political tropes, or signals for targeted content. The language of culture becomes another channel for profiling and persuasion. In this context, pseudo-reading becomes not just a harmless social performance but a vulnerability—a pattern of behaviour easily mined and manipulated. Big Data turns the lie of having read '1984' into something actionable, something measurable, something profitable. And in a world increasingly driven by algorithms, even unfinished books contribute to the construction of public opinion, cultural narratives, and consumer behaviour. Thus, the literary bluff, once confined to dinner party conversations, now shapes industries. The unread book is no longer inert—it is a digital trace, part of the vast machinery of surveillance capitalism. As Big Data rewrites the way human behaviour is tracked and theorised, pseudo-reading is no longer just a symptom of insecurity—it is raw material for manipulation. The pseudo-reading society, where literary bluffing replaces genuine engagement, has become fertile ground for Big Data manipulation. Unread books are turning into powerful tools for shaping perception, behaviour, and public opinion.

2.2. Conspicuous dishonesty

(Fudge factors and false faces: The ethics of everyday deceit)

'Our dishonesty is proportional to our ability to rationalise it'.

— Dan Ariely, The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty

Honest truth about dishonesty

In 'The Honest Truth About Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone—Especially Ourselves [38]', Dan Ariely explores the subtle and often unconscious ways people cheat and deceive. He argues that dishonesty is not limited to a few bad actors but is instead a common human tendency, shaped by psychological and social factors. People usually do not set out to lie or steal in grand ways. Instead, they bend rules just a little, telling themselves stories that make those actions feel justified. Ariely challenges the idea that cheating is always a rational cost-benefit decision. While traditional economic models suggest that people weigh risks against rewards, he presents research showing that our choices are rarely so calculated. Instead, we tend to cheat just enough to benefit but not so much that we lose our self-image as good people. That is why small dishonest acts are more common. They are easier to excuse and easier to forget. He shows how this works through various experiments. In one, participants were given a chance to cheat on a math test for money. Most did not cheat outrageously but altered just enough answers to make a profit while still feeling honest. Another study found that people wearing counterfeit designer sunglasses were more likely to lie and cheat. The message: even seemingly harmless actions like wearing fakes can shift how we see ourselves and how we behave. Ariely also explores how factors like mental fatigue, social cues, and creativity affect our honesty. When people are tired or under cognitive stress, they are more likely to cheat. When they see others around them behaving dishonestly, they feel more comfortable doing the same. And creative individuals, he notes, are particularly skilled at rationalising their actions. They can craft believable stories that make dishonesty seem like a reasonable choice. Conflict of interest plays a big role too. People often do not notice how their own incentives distort their thinking. Ariely tells stories of doctors who recommend unnecessary procedures or financial professionals who inflate numbers—rarely out of malice, but because their goals subtly warp their judgment. Even full disclosure, like telling someone you have a bias, does not always help. It can make the advisor feel licensed to push harder, while the listener still underestimates the distortion. Dan Ariely argues that most people cheat less than they could. His research suggests that dishonesty is not driven by criminal intent or a cold calculation of risk. Instead, people cheat just enough to gain something while still seeing themselves as honest. This balance is what he calls the 'fudge factor'. It explains why everyday dishonesty often happens in small doses. People fudge timesheets, inflate small expenses, or ignore minor rules—not because they are villains, but because they can justify these acts to themselves. In experiments like the matrix task, a few participants exaggerate wildly, but the majority cheat just a little. These minor deviations are less noticeable but more widespread. Collectively, they amount to more harm than big scandals. Even in areas like infidelity, Ariely believes people rarely approach decisions with pure cost-benefit logic. Instead, they justify small acts of disloyalty, often seeing themselves as mostly faithful. While cheating in romantic relationships is harder to study

[38] Ariely, D. (2012) The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone—Especially Ourselves. New York: Harper.

experimentally, it still reflects the broader trend: people bend rules just enough to feel okay about themselves. The lesson here is not that people are angels. Dishonesty is common, but it is rarely extreme. And because people cheat within the limits of self-image, punishment alone will not fix the problem. Ariely suggests other approaches: moral reminders, ethical pledges, and structured rituals that help people reset their moral compass. Confession, holidays, or symbolic gestures can all help people reflect and realign with their values. One historical example he finds useful is the Roman custom of whispering 'Memento mori' to victorious generals. It is a reminder of fallibility. Ariely believes we need similar reminders about our ethical weaknesses. We are not perfectly rational, so systems should be designed to account for those blind spots. What we need is a shift in how we think about cheating. It is not always about bad apples. Most dishonesty happens in small ways, driven by social influence, self-justification, or momentary lapses. By acknowledging that everyone is a little dishonest, Ariely argues, we can create more humane and effective interventions. The goal is not to catch big cheaters. It is to help ordinary people stay true to the better version of themselves they want to believe in. Ironically Ariely, faced allegations and an investigation regarding data fabrication in his research, particularly concerning studies on dishonesty. Duke University investigation cleared him of knowingly using fabricated data, but it did find that data in a specific honesty-pledge study had been manipulated. This led to the retraction of the study, which had examined the impact of an honesty pledge on odometer readings reported to an insurance company. Memento mori.

Lying and deception theory

Lying and deception are everyday behaviours but understanding what they really are—and when they are morally wrong—is far from simple. In his book 'Lying and Deception: Theory and Practice[39]', Thomas L. Carson tries to untangle these questions by carefully defining both concepts and testing them against different ethical theories. He shows that the moral weight of a lie or a deceptive act often depends on subtle differences in context, intent, and interpretation. Carson begins with definitions. A lie, in his view, happens when someone makes a statement, they believe to be false while implying that it is true. Interestingly, he argues that an intent to deceive is not always necessary for something to count as a lie. The key is that the speaker 'warrants' the truth of what they are saying—gives the impression that they are being truthful—even if everyone knows the statement is false. These so-called bald-faced lies still count because they breach the basic trust that underpins communication. Deception, on the other hand, is broader. It includes anything meant to cause someone else to hold a false belief. This can involve speech, but also actions, omissions, or misleading truths. Telling the truth in a way that is intended to mislead—such as omitting crucial context or emphasising the wrong facts—can still qualify as deception. Carson makes clear that deception is not always lying, and lying is not always effective deception. These are overlapping but distinct ideas. To explore the ethics of these behaviours, Carson turns to a range of moral theories. Kant famously claimed that lying is always wrong because it violates a moral law that must apply universally. Carson finds this view too rigid. On the other end of the spectrum, act-utilitarianism allows lying if it leads to better consequences overall, but that seems too permissive—ignoring the long-term harm that lies often cause. Carson finds a middle ground in a principle like the golden rule: if you would not want to be lied to, you should not lie to others in that same kind of situation. This approach avoids relying on vague intuitions and focuses instead on consistency and fairness. Carson applies this framework to real-world settings. In business and politics, where

[39] Carson, T. L. (2010) Lying and Deception: Theory and Practice. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

trust is crucial, the damage from lies and deception can be especially severe. Selling a used car while hiding flaws, omitting facts in a political speech, or spinning statistics to mislead—these are all forms of deception that do not always involve outright lies but still erode trust. Carson argues that in such contexts, professionals have a duty to be not just technically honest, but open and transparent. He ends by distinguishing between two types of honesty. There is a basic honesty—just not lying or misleading. Then there is a deeper honesty, which means being candid, forthcoming, and willing to share the whole truth. The former is a minimum standard; the latter is an aspirational ideal.

Weaponised lies

In a world flooded with information, much of what we think we know comes not from our own experience but from what others tell us. We hear it from teachers, news outlets, websites, social media, or even casual conversation. But not all of it is reliable. Some of it is outdated, some distorted, and some false. In 'Weaponised Lies: How to Think Critically in the Post-Truth Era [40]', Daniel J. Levitin urges readers to approach information with a sharper eye and a clearer mind. Levitin reminds us that the truth can be twisted in subtle ways. Half-truths are especially dangerous because they carry a trace of credibility. People are more likely to accept them without question. And once an idea takes hold—true or not—it can be hard to dislodge. The only defence is careful thinking and a willingness to question what appears obvious. To evaluate a claim, we need to start with the source. Who is saying it? What are their credentials? Are they an expert in the field they are speaking about, or just borrowing the language of authority? Many websites look professional or trustworthy, but the names behind them may not be. Even academic-sounding domains like .org or .edu do not guarantee accuracy. Some are operated by organisations with clear agendas. Others simply post unchecked or biased material. That is why it is essential to check the motivation behind the message. Industries, politicians, and interest groups all have reasons to frame facts in ways that benefit them. A food company might downplay harmful ingredients. A government might release only favourable statistics. Even legitimate experts can go off course when speaking outside their own field. Levitin warns us to look for sources grounded in peer-reviewed research or consistent editorial standards, not just reputation or name recognition. One challenge of the digital age is that bad information does not disappear. Even after a false story is debunked, it can linger online for years, reshared by people who never saw the correction. Fact-checking sites like Politifact or RetractionWatch are useful, but they do not catch everything. Readers must stay engaged and check facts themselves—especially when those facts influence serious decisions, like voting or health care. Levitin also emphasises the importance of understanding numbers. For example, many people confuse incidence (new cases) with prevalence (total existing cases), especially in health reporting. Raw figures can be misleading without context. Are the numbers adjusted for population size? Are they part of a trend or a one-time spike? Misused statistics are among the most common tools of deception. In the end, the best protection against manipulation is a set of habits: question authority, examine evidence, and resist easy conclusions. Lies that mix truth and fiction are especially effective. But once we learn the techniques that make lies persuasive, the same knowledge that could protect us can just as easily tempt us to use those lies for our own advantage.

[40] Levitin, D. J. (2017) Weaponized Lies: How to Think Critically in the Post-Truth Era. New York: Dutton.

Reading Lies

Most people believe they can spot a lie by reading body language. They expect liars to look nervous, fidget, or avoid eye contact. These ideas are widespread, but they rarely hold up under scrutiny. In 'Reading Lies: Nonverbal Communication and Deception[41]', Aldert Vrij and his co-authors show that these common beliefs about nonverbal signs of deception are mostly inaccurate. Scientific studies have tested these assumptions, and the results are not what most people expect. One popular theory suggests that lying triggers emotions like guilt, fear, or excitement. These feelings, in turn, are thought to leak out through facial expressions or nervous movements. But when researchers look closely, they find that truth tellers in stressful situations often appear just as anxious as liars. Emotional cues are not consistent, and they do not reliably point to deception. Another theory focuses on mental effort. Lying, it turns out, is hard work. A liar must invent a story, keep it straight, and watch the listener's reaction—all at the same time. This extra effort can sometimes lead to longer pauses or fewer hand gestures. Still, these signs are subtle and often go unnoticed unless specific interview techniques are used to highlight them. A third approach sees lying as a planned behaviour. People who lie may try to control how they look, avoiding anything that seems suspicious. But this strategy creates a new problem: truth tellers often act the same way. When someone knows they are being watched, they may also become self-conscious, even if they are telling the truth. The overlap in behaviour makes it hard to tell the difference. Across many studies, the most useful clues for spotting lies do not come from gestures or expressions. They come from words. When people are asked open-ended questions, liars tend to provide shorter answers, fewer details, or vague explanations. Truth tellers are usually more specific and willing to give checkable facts. Listening closely to what someone says can be more revealing than watching how they say it. Despite all this, myths about nonverbal 'tells' remain strong. People still believe liars will not meet your eyes or will shift in their seat. These ideas stick around because of confirmation bias—people notice what matches their beliefs and ignore what does not. They also rarely get feedback. After a conversation, they often never find out if the other person was lying, so their false ideas never get corrected. Future research might find that certain combinations of gestures or facial movements do carry more meaning than single actions. But for now, the evidence shows that nonverbal cues alone are weak indicators of deception. What matters more is how someone responds to carefully chosen questions and whether their answers make sense. The only safeguard is to acknowledge that deception is not only a common human practice but also an inherent tendency of language itself, thereby requiring continuous vigilance.

The importance of being honest

In 'The Importance of Being Honest: How Lying, Secrecy, and Hypocrisy Collide with Truth in Law[42]', Steven Lubet examines how truth, deception, and ethics intertwine within the legal world. Honesty is the core expectation in law, yet it is often compromised by professional obligations, personal biases, and social pressures. Lubet begins by acknowledging how even sincere efforts to tell the truth—such as testifying in court—are complicated. Observation, memory, and expression each carry their own limits, and every actor in the legal process, from lawyers to judges, faces barriers to complete candor. For lawyers, truth competes with the duty to protect clients. Advocates may face situations where clients are evasive, facts are murky, or

[41] Vrij, A., Hartwig, M. and Granhag, P. A. (2019) Reading Lies: Nonverbal Communication and Deception. In Telling Lies: Clues to Deceit in the Marketplace, Politics, and Marriage. London: Routledge.

[42] Lubet, S. (2008) The Importance of Being Honest: How Lying, Secrecy, and Hypocrisy Collide with Truth in Law. New York: NYU Press.

the pressure to win outweighs the drive for transparency. Judges are not immune either; inflated confidence in their own judgment can mask personal bias. Even law professors, who teach ethics, may compromise their own standards in pursuit of academic or ideological agendas. Lubet suggests that the profession too often accepts these compromises as inevitable rather than challenging them directly. Through historical and modern examples, Lubet shows how deception can backfire. Oscar Wilde's libel suit against the Marquess of Queensberry ended in disgrace because Wilde concealed the truth from his own legal team. Rather than trusting his counsel, he tried to outwit the system with charm and deflection. The strategy collapsed under cross-examination, leading not only to the failure of his lawsuit but also to his own criminal conviction and ruin. Lubet contrasts this with Bill Clinton's evasive testimony, which had political consequences but allowed him to retain power—revealing how context and privilege can shape outcomes. Lubet also explores how honesty intersects with professional conduct outside courtrooms. He discusses a law student whose online nudity raised concerns about bar admission. Lubet argues that the real question is not about morality, but whether such behaviour predicts future misconduct. In contrast, a student's joke about mass violence after a tragedy presents a more serious issue. Lubet draws a line between expression that is merely controversial and conduct that hints at recklessness or dishonesty. Another story—about Lubet bargaining with horse guides in Petra—shows how markets, like law, are shaped by more than logic. Despite economic expectations, the guides refused to lower their prices. Their decisions were shaped not by supply and demand, but by pride, custom, and the value of dignity. Just as in law, truth in markets is not only about numbers; it is also about people and meaning. Lubet argues for greater realism and integrity. Lawyers must resist the temptation to hide behind abstract roles, like the so-called scrivener in joint representation. When representing multiple clients, disclosure of risks and open communication are essential. Only clients can weigh the danger of conflicts, and it is the lawyer's duty to inform them clearly. Honesty in law is a constant struggle, not a given. Lubet calls on the legal community to recognise its vulnerabilities—bias, secrecy, and selective truth—and meet them with a deliberate effort to act with candor, even in a system that thrives on contradiction and conflict. In the legal realm, absolute honesty is often less important than strategic persuasion, where navigating bias, uncertainty, and competing obligations can matter more than telling the unvarnished truth.

Symbolic fiction of culture

In 'The Dawn of Language: How We Came to Talk[43]' Sverker Johansson suggests that at the core of culture, language, and the symbolic life of Homo sapiens lies a shared commitment to useful fictions—abstract constructs that need not be true to function. Cultural man is sustained by 'lies that work': symbols, myths, and narratives that forge collective belief and enable coordination across large groups. A young woman sits outside a small hut, carefully applying red ochre to an ivory figurine. The carved object, rich in symbols, is not for trade or utility. It is meant to unlock her fertility with the help of a forest spirit. Scenes like this help illustrate what separates early humans from other animals. Chimpanzees and other apes may use tools and communicate, but they do not engage in symbolic expression or decoration. Early humans, in contrast, created art that went beyond survival. They carved, painted, and adorned not because they had to, but because they could imagine meaning and beauty. Culture and language are both rooted in symbols. Words stand in for ideas. So do carved lines, painted surfaces, and ornamental objects. The mind that can handle such abstraction is what Sverker

[43] Johansson, S. (2021) The Dawn of Language: How We Came to Talk. Translated by Frank Perry. London: Macmillan.

Johansson calls a 'symbol-ready' mind. This capability suggests that, even before spoken language was fully developed, humans could share ideas and emotions in nonverbal but meaningful ways. Archaeological evidence supports this. Early finds of decorated shells, coloured pigments, and sculpted items show that symbolic culture emerged long before writing or complex speech. The shift from functional tools to symbolic artefacts marks a turning point. Australopithecus and early Homo species left behind sharp stones meant to cut or scrape. Later, Homo erectus began creating hand axes that were too large to use, and collections of unusual stones that served no clear purpose. These objects may have been displayed, traded, or revered. The behaviour mirrors human habits of curating and attributing value to objects beyond their use. Later hominins, including Neandertals and Denisovans, used pigments, wore shells as ornaments, and carved figures. These items reflected abstract thought, belief, and the beginnings of language. For years, researchers focused on European sites like Lascaux, thinking symbolic culture began around 40,000 years ago. But discoveries in Africa and Asia reveal that symbolic behaviour is older and more widespread. Early humans and their cousins were crafting and expressing meaning in various ways for at least 200,000 years, more. The record now includes cave art in Indonesia, decorated bones in Africa, and carved figures in Siberia. Such finds suggest symbolic thought was not exclusive to one group or one time. It grew slowly and in parallel with other mental developments. Culture in this sense becomes a mirror of language readiness. If people could carve beliefs into ivory, they could speak of them too. Though we cannot recover the first sentences ever spoken, we can trace the minds that formed them. The earliest artefacts show intent, abstraction, and imagination. They are indirect but powerful clues that a form of protolanguage existed. Through ritual, decoration, and symbolism, early humans communicated ideas larger than themselves. These expressions of meaning laid the groundwork for the fully developed languages we speak today. Useful fictions—symbols, myths, and stories—can outlive their creators, shaping belief and behaviour for generations by working not through truth, but through the shared meaning they inspire.

Telling lies

Paul Ekman's 'Telling Lies: Clues to Deceit[44]' explores the subtle—and sometimes not so subtle—ways people deceive one another. He opens with two contrasting stories: Adolf Hitler, lying without remorse to Neville Chamberlain before invading Czechoslovakia, and 'Mary', a suicidal patient who lies to leave the hospital but cannot hide her inner despair. Hitler's cold calculation allowed his lies to remain undetected. Mary, on the other hand, leaked signals—slight facial expressions and restrained gestures—revealing her real emotions. These examples show that lies come in many forms, and not all are equally difficult to detect. A lie, as Ekman defines it, is a deliberate attempt to mislead someone without giving prior notice. This does not include errors, self-deception, or pretend performances in expected contexts like theater. Lies can take two major forms: concealment, where key information is left out, and falsification, where false information is inserted. Concealment is often easier and feels less morally wrong. But when pushed, liars must often falsify to protect the original lie. Concealing negative emotions is particularly challenging. Many people cover their true feelings with smiles because smiles are the easiest expression to fake and disarm suspicion. But some liars, especially skilled or emotionally distant ones, can even fake distress to manipulate others. Ekman notes that not all lies fail. Sometimes they succeed because the liar is composed or because the person being lied to prefers not to uncover the truth. Emotional turmoil increases the risk of failure. Micro-

[44] Ekman, P. (2009) Telling Lies: Clues to Deceit in the Marketplace, Politics, and Marriage. New York: W\.W. Norton.

expressions—brief flashes of genuine emotion—can leak from the face. Voice tone, pauses, or mismatched gestures may also give clues. But these signs do not always appear. Successful liars can control or suppress them, and observers may lack the skill or will to notice. Still, Ekman's experiments show that when strong emotions are involved—shame, fear, guilt—leakage becomes harder to prevent. Not all deception is harmful. In personal relationships, people sometimes lie to protect loved ones or avoid unnecessary conflict. A spouse may hide an affair; a parent may soften a truth. Ekman does not take a moral stance against all lies. He acknowledges that polite fictions often smooth over daily life. However, the same mechanisms that allow white lies also enable manipulation in politics, business, and crime. The challenge lies in distinguishing compassion from exploitation. Ekman also warns against overconfidence in lie detection. Professionals—from police to doctors to politicians—sometimes rely on hunches or poorly tested methods. Although training in reading facial expressions and body language can help, it must be paired with humility and a grasp of emotional nuance. Knowing the type of lie, the liar's emotional state, and the stakes involved is key to assessing truthfulness. Ultimately, 'Telling Lies' reveals that human deception is complex and socially embedded. We live in a world where complete honesty and total deceit are both rare. Somewhere between, we manage our relationships, shield our vulnerabilities, and navigate truth's fragile terrain. Telling lies is ultimately the same as telling truths, because both rely on the same tools of language and expression to create a version of reality others are willing to accept.

Science Fictions

In 'Science Fictions Science Fictions: How Fraud, Bias, Negligence, and Hype Undermine the Search for Truth[45]', Stuart Ritchie investigates the ways fraud, bias, negligence, and media hype have undermined modern science. His starting point is a striking example: in 2011, psychologist Daryl Bem published a study claiming that students could predict future events. The experiment was peer-reviewed and appeared in a respected journal. But when Ritchie and colleagues tried to replicate the study, their results showed no such psychic ability. Still, their replication was rejected by journals, exposing a larger issue—replication, the cornerstone of scientific method, is often discouraged. Around the same time, another scandal unfolded. Diederik Stapel, a well-known Dutch psychologist, had fabricated data for years. Dozens of his papers, many published in prestigious outlets, were based on experiments that never happened. The academic system that should have caught this deceit not only failed but actively rewarded it. These examples reveal that systemic flaws—not just individual dishonesty—allow bad science to flourish. The crisis goes beyond psychology. In medicine, economics, neuroscience, and biology, replication often fails. Ritchie discusses how brain imaging software once produced widespread false positives, how popular behavioural theories like 'power posing' could not be reproduced, and how even major cancer studies collapsed under scrutiny. These failures are not isolated incidents but symptoms of deeper structural problems. One major factor is the reward system in science. Researchers are pressured to publish exciting results, and funding often depends on novelty, not accuracy. This creates incentives for questionable practices—selective reporting, p-hacking, and ignoring failed replications. Journals prefer eye-catching headlines, while null results rarely see the light of day. As Ritchie points out, studies that cannot be repeated have little value, yet they continue to influence policy, medicine, and education. Despite these problems, Ritchie does not argue that science is broken beyond repair. He emphasises the power of science as a self-correcting system—when

[45] Ritchie, S. (2020) Science Fictions: How Fraud, Bias, Negligence, and Hype Undermine the Search for Truth. London: Bodley Head.

its tools are used properly. He advocates for open data, transparent methods, preregistration of studies, and stronger replication efforts. He also supports 'meta-science', the study of how research is done, to identify and fix the system's weaknesses. Ultimately, Science Fictions is not an attack on science itself, but a call to reform it. It shows that peer review, replication, and transparency are not optional—they are essential. Without them, the scientific process becomes vulnerable to error, manipulation, and public mistrust. If researchers can be trained to value accuracy over fame, and if institutions reward careful work rather than sensationalism, then science can rebuild its credibility. Bias in science takes many forms. The 'tyranny of prior preference' remains a core problem: once people believe something, they often see only what confirms it and ignore what contradicts it. One of the most damaging is publication bias. Journals are more likely to print surprising or positive results than studies with null findings. This means that the scientific record can give a false sense of certainty or effect size. Researchers might run several experiments, publish the one that 'worked', and discard the rest. The public and other scientists then draw conclusions from incomplete data. The result is a literature built on half-truths. Science thrives not because it is perfect but because it has tools to correct itself. Those tools need to be used more often, and with more honesty. Only then can science begin to overcome the biases that cloud its judgment and fulfill its promise of uncovering the truth. Ritchie's message is clear: science remains one of humanity's greatest tools for understanding the world. But it must hold itself to higher standards if it is to retain public trust and truly advance knowledge. Lying in science is no different from everyday speech, because science is not a sacred realm apart from life but simply another domain of language, with all its flaws, biases, and failures.

Discourse and parrhesia

In his 1983 Berkeley lectures[46], Michel Foucault explored the ancient Greek concept of parrhesia—often translated as 'free speech'—and its importance in the history of truth-telling. Rather than viewing parrhesia as simply the right to speak, he emphasised its ethical and political significance. It is not just saying what one believes, but doing so with courage, especially when truth is dangerous or unwelcome. The word parrhesia first appears in Greek literature during the fifth century BCE, notably in Euripides, and continues to appear in later philosophical and Christian texts. Foucault traced its forms—noun, verb, and agent—and its evolution from civic expression in democratic Athens to a more introspective philosophical exercise. At its core, parrhesia means saying everything one honestly thinks. It requires openness, clarity, and a willingness to face consequences. Unlike rhetoric, which persuades through technique regardless of belief, parrhesia reveals the speaker's genuine convictions. It is not just expressive—it is risky. For Foucault, this danger is central. Parrhesia is not neutral. It creates a relationship of imbalance, often pitting a speaker against authority. A citizen criticising a ruler, a philosopher addressing a tyrant, or even someone confronting their own self-deception—each case involves risk. The parrhesiastes does not protect themselves with flattery or ambiguity. Their strength lies in a duty to truth, not in institutional power. The contrast with modern truth-telling is striking. In the Cartesian tradition, truth must be established with certainty and proof. For the ancients, parrhesia depended on moral integrity. A person's character determined their access to and ability to express truth. This shift reflects broader transformations in how societies understand knowledge and responsibility. Foucault examined how parrhesia intersected with politics, rhetoric, and philosophy. In democratic

[46] Foucault, M. (2001) Discourse and Truth: The Problematization of Parrhesia. Six lectures given at the University of California, Berkeley, 1983. Ed. J. Pearson. Northwestern University.

Athens, it was vital for public debate and civic life. But under monarchies, its role narrowed to advisors speaking frankly to rulers—if they dared. Philosophers like Socrates took parrhesia into the personal realm, asking others—and themselves—hard questions. Truth-telling became a way of life, not just a form of speech. Later, the Epicureans institutionalised it within their communities as mutual critique aimed at ethical progress. Parrhesia declined as public life changed. Rhetoric absorbed its language but lost its soul. Speaking freely became a performance rather than a duty. Foucault saw this not as a loss of liberty alone but as a loss of the ethical relationship between truth, speaker, and listener. In Foucault's reading, parrhesia is not nostalgic—it is a call to examine how power, risk, and speech continue to interact. He did not idealise the past, but he did suggest that modern societies could relearn from these ancient practices. The point is not to restore old forms but to recognise how truth-telling always demands courage. The Greeks began to treat parrhesia as something that needed regulation and ethical consideration. In Socratic and Platonic thought, the question became not just who speaks, but how one earns the right to be heard. This concern with the moral standing of the truth-teller gave rise to the critical spirit in Western philosophy. Parrhesia, then, becomes more than speech. It is a practice of courage, of responsibility, and of transformation. As both a personal and social activity, it offers a model for ethical living rooted in truthfulness, reflection, and care for the self and others. Foucault's analysis shows how parrhesia evolved from a democratic necessity into a philosophical and moral practice. It reflected the changing nature of truth and power—where the right to speak carried risks, and speaking truth became an ethical stance rather than a political guarantee. The legacy of parrhesia lies in its insistence that truth requires both courage and a community willing to hear it. Parrhesia makes the bond between language and reality—especially the concrete reality of one's own land and tribe—more important than life itself. What you dare to say with your name, in your place, before your people, is who you are, and the only thing that truly matters.

Neural pathways of deceit and irony

In the study 'Neural Correlates Underlying the Comprehension of Deceitful and Ironic Communicative Intentions[47]' by Francesca M. Bosco and colleagues investigates how the brain processes complex social meanings such as deceit and irony. Using neuroimaging, the researchers identify distinct neural pathways involved in understanding communicative intentions that deviate from literal meaning, highlighting the cognitive demands of interpreting non-literal language. Understanding language is more than decoding words. It involves grasping the speaker's intent, especially when that intent is hidden behind irony or deception. Bosco and her colleagues explore how the brain processes such indirect forms of communication. They look closely at the neural systems involved in understanding irony and deceit, showing that different types of nonliteral speech rely on different mental and neural resources. To comprehend irony or deception, one must move beyond the literal meaning and consider context, beliefs, and motives. This requires theory of mind—the ability to attribute mental states to others. When someone says something ironic, listeners must understand that the speaker means the opposite of what is said, often to highlight a flaw or express sarcasm. When someone lies, the goal is to mislead. Both types of communication manipulate expectations, but their intentions diverge sharply. The study used functional MRI to examine

[47] Bosco, F.M., Parola, A., Valentini, M.C. and Morese, R. (2017). Neural correlates underlying the comprehension of deceitful and ironic communicative intentions. Cortex, 94, pp.73–86. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cortex.2017.06.010.

the brain's activity while participants listened to short stories involving irony, lies, or literal statements. The results showed that while some brain regions are commonly activated by both irony and deception, others differ. Shared regions include the medial prefrontal cortex and temporo-parietal junction—areas associated with theory of mind. These areas help us infer others' thoughts, a skill essential for interpreting nonliteral language. However, irony activates the right superior temporal sulcus and inferior frontal gyrus more strongly, indicating a need to process unexpected or incongruous meanings. Deception, on the other hand, involves more activity in regions tied to executive function, such as the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex. This reflects the cognitive load of holding conflicting representations in mind and suppressing the literal interpretation. This suggests that irony may be more socially nuanced, involving humour and criticism, while deception involves more effortful control and planning. The different neural pathways show that the brain handles these two communicative strategies with distinct but overlapping mechanisms. Understanding a lie involves managing conflicting knowledge and motives. Irony, though indirect, often assumes a shared understanding between speaker and listener. Deceit, by contrast, thrives on hiding intent. The study also notes that emotional engagement differs between the two. Irony, especially when humorous, can elicit positive social bonding, while deceit often evokes distrust or vigilance. The listener's brain must navigate these emotional cues as well, highlighting how closely tied language is to social and emotional intelligence. In daily life, humans constantly interpret veiled meanings. Whether detecting sarcasm or spotting a lie, these skills are vital to navigating social interactions. This study shows how the brain juggles these tasks using specific cognitive and emotional circuits, offering insights into disorders where such interpretation fails, such as autism or schizophrenia. The investigation of how humans deceive themselves, distort truth, and obscure intention is inherently fraught, as even the research process itself may be influenced by "deceitful and ironic communicative intentions," thereby obscuring the very phenomena it aims to illuminate.

Logic made easy

In 'Logic Made Easy[48]', Deborah J. Bennett opens with a sharp observation: logic is not as common as many believe. Most people assume they think logically, but often what passes for reasoning is shaped by habit, bias, or confusion. From the start, the book questions this assumption, arguing that genuine logical thinking is rare and difficult, even among educated adults. Instead of offering a dry manual of rules or technical jargon, Bennett explains why humans struggle with logic, despite its importance in daily life. People expect the world to make sense. From a young age, children ask questions and want explanations. As adults, the expectation for reasoned thought continues in relationships, work, and public discourse. Yet even in professional environments, flawed arguments and logical fallacies are widespread. Bennett explores why that gap exists. The problem is not that people are incapable of logic, but that logical thinking requires effort, awareness, and training—things most people have not practiced deliberately. Logical errors are not just academic problems. They appear in casual conversation, courtroom trials, scientific claims, advertising, and politics. In each case, understanding what follows logically from given information can prevent deception and misunderstanding. Yet, as cognitive psychology shows, people often fall for misleading reasoning. Experiments by researchers like Peter Wason reveal that even intelligent individuals routinely make predictable logical mistakes. The book also traces logic's historical development to show how the field evolved and why it remains essential. Starting with the Greeks, especially Aristotle, logic was seen as a foundation for sound reasoning. Aristotle laid out rules for valid

[48] Bennett, D. J. (2004) Logic Made Easy: How to Know When Language Deceives You. Norton.

arguments using propositions and conclusions, setting the tone for future generations. Later, thinkers like Leibniz dreamt of reducing argument to a universal language. His ideas, though largely ignored in his lifetime, were later developed into symbolic logic by George Boole. Boole's system now forms the basis for modern computer logic and programming. Despite centuries of study and formalisation, humans continue to struggle with basic reasoning. Bennett suggests that part of the difficulty lies in how our minds process information. We often add irrelevant details, ignore key facts, or draw conclusions based on incomplete thoughts. These errors stem not from stupidity, but from how human cognition evolved—to make fast, sometimes intuitive decisions, not necessarily logical ones. Logic, then, is not just a matter of intelligence, but of discipline. Professions that demand clear thinking—medicine, law, science, engineering—all rely on the ability to separate what is known from what is assumed, and to test conclusions against rules of inference. This is also true in everyday life: knowing when a statement truly follows from evidence, or when it merely sounds convincing, is a vital skill. In the end, Bennett's message is both simple and profound. Logic matters because it helps people make better decisions and protects them from being misled. But logic must be learnt, practiced, and consciously applied. It is not just an abstract subject for philosophers or mathematicians. It is a tool for anyone who wants to think clearly in a confusing world. Cognitive research confirms that logical errors often spring from the tension between formal rules and natural speech. People use rough reasoning shortcuts instead of precise inferences. Humans, unlike machines, rely on commonsense background knowledge. This gives human thinking flexibility but also makes it more prone to error. The challenge is not a lack of logic, but the complexity of applying it through language. Formal logic demands clear structure, while human speech thrives on nuance. To think clearly, one must be aware of both—the logic underneath and the language through which it is expressed. Logic can serve deception as readily as it can serve truth, because it is not inherently tied to morality but shaped by linguistic stereotypes. When detached from ethical grounding, logical reasoning becomes a tool that can justify almost anything, however false or destructive.

2.3. Linguistics of lying

(The hidden syntax of lying: How deception lives in form, not just content)

'The essence of the lie implies, in fact, that the liar is actually in complete possession of the truth'.

— Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness

'Lying is not a linguistic anomaly; it is a grammatical option embedded in every language'.

— Timothy R. Levine, Duped

Linguistics of lying

Lying is not just a moral issue or a psychological act—it is deeply rooted in how people use language. In 'The Linguistics of Lying[49]' Jörg Meibauer explores this idea by showing that lying is not simply a matter of saying something false. It is a subtle manipulation of language structures, from grammar and syntax to prosody and pragmatics. His work offers a wide-ranging linguistic account of how lies are constructed, recognised, and understood. At its core,

[49] Meibauer, J. (2018) The Linguistics of Lying. Annual Review of Linguistics, 4, pp. 357–375.

lying involves intention. A person who lies must believe what they say is false and must want someone else to accept it as true. But how this intention plays out in language is more complex. It is not always about using clear declarative sentences. The sentence structure can be crafted to imply things without explicitly stating them, giving liars more flexibility. Semantically, lying sits between truth and intention. Traditional definitions focus on whether the speaker believes what they are saying is false. But studies suggest that listeners often judge a lie by whether it is objectively false, not by the speaker's belief. People also lie with varying degrees of precision, using modifiers like 'maybe' or 'probably' to blur responsibility. These linguistic hedges make the lie harder to detect. Pragmatically, lies challenge the basic rules of cooperative conversation. They violate what philosopher H. P. Grice called the Maxim of Quality—do not say what you believe to be false. But deception can also arise through implicature: a speaker might not state something false, but their phrasing invites a misleading inference. Sarcasm, metaphor, and irony can all contribute to deception without overt lying. Children start lying around age four, which coincides with the development of the theory of mind—the ability to understand that others have beliefs different from one's own. Culturally, lying serves different roles; in some societies, it can be used for harmony or politeness. Neurologically, lying taps into brain regions involved in control and inhibition, though these areas are not exclusive to deception. In short, lying is woven into the very structure of language. It is not a glitch in the system but a function of how language works—how meaning is shaped, implied, and understood. Words do not merely describe the world—they direct attention, establish salience, and set expectations. They create patterns of perception and habitual responses. This makes language a powerful tool for shaping not only external coordination but internal reasoning. 'The Linguistics of Lying' explores the many ways how lying is making sense. Sense making begins when something catches us off guard. An expectation is violated. We pause, notice, and try to explain what just happened. It is no surprise that stories, even simple ones, help people bond and reaffirm shared values. Gossip is the social glue of human groups. It is more than idle chatter. It teaches rules, manages reputations, and keeps communities together. Language does not only explain—it also frames. Language acts like a compass in social life, pointing out who is in, who is out, and how much one belongs. Reputation is built through stories. That is why storytelling is not just personal. It plays a role in the structure of society. It defines the circles of trust and obligation that keep communities functioning. Sense making, then, is not just a private act. It is a collective one. People use language to make sense of their place in the world and to help others do the same. Stories, greetings, jokes, and even corrections form part of a continuous process of social orientation. They are the signs by which humans navigate the complex networks they live in. Lying, as Jörg Meibauer suggests, is not simply a moral failure but a form of sense making—an everyday tool for navigating social expectations, managing impressions, and preserving relationships. In many situations, deception serves communication more effectively than strict truthfulness, helping to smooth interactions, protect feelings, or maintain social order. Because of this pragmatic function, lying is deeply woven into the fabric of ordinary language, not as an exception but as a pervasive and often necessary strategy in human communication.

The devil wins

In 'The Devil Wins: A History of Lying from the Garden of Eden to the Enlightenment[50]' Dallas G. Denery II examines the subtle yet profound ways in which deception, moral failure, and spiritual compromise infiltrate modern life, revealing how adversarial forces can triumph

[50] Denery, D. G. (2015) The Devil Wins: A History of Lying from the Garden of Eden to the Enlightenment. Princeton University Press.

through seemingly small, everyday choices. In Dante's Inferno, the eighth circle of hell, Malebolge, is home to liars, fraudsters, and deceivers. It is a world of twisting valleys and grotesque punishments—flatterers swim through excrement, hypocrites wear gilded cloaks filled with lead, and traitors are frozen in ice. The further Dante and Virgil descend, the more severe the deceit and the punishment. But the question that haunts these pages is not about justice. It is deeper: is it ever acceptable to lie? The history of this question is long and full of contradictions. In the Christian tradition, lying has often been considered an absolute moral failure. Augustine of Hippo condemned all lies without exception, arguing that deception disrupts divine truth. The Fall itself—humanity's first act of disobedience—was, after all, born of a lie. In this theology, to lie is to deny God. But as time passed, that moral certainty began to fracture. During the Renaissance, Niccolò Machiavelli argued that in a corrupt world, honesty might be a luxury one cannot afford. For rulers to survive, he suggested, they must learn to lie well. Power and politics demanded cunning. A prince must be both lion and fox. Lying, in this view, was not a sin but a tool. As society became more complex, the moral contours of deception shifted again. In early modern Europe, the art of court life depended on masks—on coded speech, polite fictions, and strategic lies. To succeed, courtiers had to conceal their thoughts, flatter superiors, and bend the truth as needed. This was not just tolerated. It was expected. Lying became a necessary part of social life. Women, too, were caught in the web of deceit—often unfairly. For centuries, they were accused of being naturally deceptive, a stereotype drawn from ancient medical texts and religious suspicion. But writers like Christine de Pizan and Madeleine de Scudéry pushed back. They argued that if women deceived, it was not because of nature, but necessity. In a patriarchal world, deception could be a form of self-defence, a means of survival, and even a way to preserve social peace. Lying, then, is not just a sin or a tactic. It is a window into how people live together—how they navigate fear, power, love, and shame. Even the Devil, in Christian thought, seduces with lies. But it is not always the Devil who wins. Sometimes, deception is the fragile bridge between chaos and order, between truth and survival.

Designed to deceive ourselves

In 'Born Liars: Why We Can't Live Without Deceit[51]', Ian Leslie argues that dishonesty is not a moral failing but an evolutionary necessity, woven into the fabric of human interaction and essential for social cohesion. He argues that we are designed to deceive not only others but also ourselves suggesting that self-deception plays a vital role in maintaining identity, motivation, and mental stability. Lying, in this view, is less a moral anomaly than a psychological mechanism that allows humans to function within complex social systems. Henry Jekyll's confession in Stevenson's story of dual identity captures something fundamental about human nature. People often split themselves in two—not just morally, but perceptually. Modern neuroscience confirms this. Our minds do not merely reflect reality; they invent it. The act of seeing, hearing, or feeling is not passive. It is a process full of assumptions, edits, and illusions. David Eagleman, a neuroscientist, describes perception as a kind of narrative construction. The brain constantly fills in gaps to create a seamless experience. What seems like unbroken, detailed awareness is a careful fiction. Even basic sight is stitched together from fragments, with the brain guessing what is in the blind spots or between eye movements. This is where deception begins—not with language, but with vision itself. Michael Gazzaniga's work with split-brain patients brought this further into focus. After surgery that severed the connection between the brain's hemispheres, patients showed something strange. When each half of the

[51] Leslie, I. (2011) Born Liars: Why We Can't Live Without Deceit. Quercus.

brain was shown a different image, the left hemisphere—responsible for speech—made up explanations for behaviour it did not initiate. It had no access to what the right hemisphere had seen, yet it produced confident stories. Gazzaniga called this the 'interpreter'. This part of the brain makes sense of things, even when the facts are missing. It lies to protect the feeling of being a unified self. This is not just a medical curiosity. Every person confabulates in daily life. When people are asked why they made a choice, they often invent a reason after the fact. The explanation feels true, but it is just a guess. In a classic experiment, subjects preferred one photograph over another, then were handed the photo they did not choose—and did not notice. They still defended it as their choice. The mind values coherence more than accuracy. Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance explains why. When beliefs and actions conflict, people feel mental discomfort. To ease this, they adjust one or the other—often changing their memory or beliefs. This is why people cling to false predictions, why cult members stay after failed prophecies, and why someone will keep defending a bad decision. The alternative—admitting error—is more painful than believing a lie. This inner deception is not limited to the individual. Society encourages it. People tell small lies to seem kind, confident, or competent. These deceptions help maintain relationships and reputations. This tendency is so embedded that it shapes how people see themselves. Over time, the line between who one is and who one pretends to be blurs. People internalise the stories they tell others. Self-deception becomes identity. In evolutionary terms, this makes sense. In complex societies, the ability to lie, to guess others' thoughts, and to manage appearances can be the difference between acceptance and rejection. The brain evolved to navigate these pressures, even if it means bending reality. Self-deception helps people move forward, stay sane, and fit in. If, as "Born Liars" suggests, deception is essential to both survival and identity, can humans ever truly separate who they are from the lies they live by?

Does truth matter?

In 'Does Truth Matter? Democracy and Public Space[52]', Ronald Geenens and Raoul Tinnevelt compile essays that critically examine the role of truth in democratic life and public discourse. The collection explores how the erosion of universal truths impacts democratic decision-making, public engagement, and the legitimacy of collective institutions. Truth has always been a contested concept in political thought. In democracies, it plays a strange double role—necessary for deliberation yet often subordinated to power. The essays collected in Does Truth Matter? Democracy and Public Space, edited by Raf Geenens, explore how truth and public discourse shape modern democratic life. They reveal that the search for truth in politics is not simply about facts but about the structures that allow or suppress those facts. Public space is more than a physical setting. It is also an arena where citizens engage in political debate. Following ancient Greek ideas of the oikos, agora, and ekklesia, the editors show how democratic life requires both physical gathering places and conceptual arenas where truth can be pursued. Hannah Arendt viewed this space as essential for freedom—where people act, speak, and confront reality. Jürgen Habermas argued that public spaces, such as salons and cafés, once fostered rational discussion, a tradition eroded by modern commercialisation and digital fragmentation. But can truth really guide political life? Arendt admitted truth is often powerless in politics. Plato demanded that truth rule through philosopher-kings, but democratic thinkers like John Rawls warn that no single truth should dominate in pluralistic societies. Instead, democracy should rely on reasonable dialogue, even among those who disagree. Cheryl Misak and Robert Talisse suggest that the democratic process itself is a truth-seeking activity.

[52] Geenens, R. and Tinnevelt, R. (eds) (2015) Does Truth Matter? Democracy and Public Space. Springer.

Argumentation, justification, and accountability are not distractions from politics—they are its foundation. Still, good debate does not happen automatically. Institutions must be designed to encourage fairness, inclusivity, and critical thinking. The popular idea that a free marketplace of ideas will naturally lead to truth is misleading. Like a city needing roads and public squares, public discourse needs rules and structures. Matthew Festenstein emphasises the role of trust, while Glen Newey warns that democracy will always involve illusion. Political actors use language strategically, and even good citizens can be misled. Physical space matters too. As Bart Verschaffel argues, shrinking public spaces weaken democratic engagement. Without places to gather, protest, and talk face-to-face, citizens lose the habit of public life. John Parkinson notes that digital forums do not fully replace physical presence. Real human encounters—where people hear tone, see gestures, and face one another—are harder to manipulate than online conversations. Truth also intersects with political legitimacy. David Estlund's theory of epistemic proceduralism suggests that democracy is not just fair—it has knowledge-producing value. Even if decisions are flawed, they emerge from a system that encourages reasoning and correction. Expert knowledge matters, but democratic legitimacy does not depend on experts ruling. Instead, it depends on a process open to revision, grounded in moral equality, and capable of learning over time. Philippe Raynaud highlights the ongoing conflict between power and truth. Hobbes claimed that law stems from authority, not morality. Later thinkers, like Hans Kelsen, turned this into procedural democracy—law as a system of rules, not values. Yet Tocqueville feared that when democratic majorities suppress dissent, they also suppress truth. A system without room for disagreement is a system without learning. In the end, truth matters—but only if institutions make space for it. Democracy must protect the freedom to speak, question, and revise. Without that, it becomes a hollow form, where power replaces persuasion and conformity replaces understanding. If democracy depends less on finding absolute truth than on sustaining the pretence of searching for it, does truth matter—or is it the performance of that search that keeps democratic life alive?

Truth and trust

In 'Truth and Trust in Democratic Epistemology[53]' Matthew Festenstein explores how democracy can be understood as an epistemic system—not just a way of counting votes, but as a method for generating better political judgments through open inquiry. Drawing from pragmatist thinkers like John Dewey, he argues that democracy functions as a process of organised intelligence, where deliberation, dissent, and public reasoning help refine beliefs over time. This view depends on fallibilism—the idea that no belief is beyond challenge. It is not that democracy discovers ultimate truths, but that it creates conditions under which truth can be approached more responsibly. In this framework, truth emerges through contestation. Citizens must be willing to have their beliefs tested and, if necessary, revised. For democracy to work as a truth-seeking system, institutions must support disagreement and allow for correction. Mechanisms like a free press, public inquiries, and deliberative forums are not just safeguards of liberty—they are essential to truth. Cheryl Misak and others suggest that democratic legitimacy grows from this capacity to test claims considering shared experience and collective reasoning, not from majority opinion alone. But democratic knowledge is rarely the result of personal investigation. Most people form political views based on information from others. This reliance on expert testimony raises the question of trust. Citizens must judge not only the content of claims but the credibility of those making them. Yet, as Mark Warren notes, politics

[53] Festenstein, M. (2015) 'Truth and Trust in Democratic Epistemology' in Geenens, R. and Tinnevelt, R. (eds) Does Truth Matter? Democracy and Public Space. Springer.

naturally breeds distrust. Conflicting interests, power struggles, and strategic behaviour create incentives to mislead. In this environment, trust must be earned rather than assumed. Festenstein argues that a well-functioning democracy needs institutions that build credibility through transparency and responsiveness. Courts, citizen juries, and investigative journalism are examples of spaces where claims are publicly tested, and speakers are held accountable. These are not perfect systems, but they allow people to evaluate both arguments and arguers. A free press, for instance, is not simply a provider of facts—it acts as a filter and a stage where competing perspectives can be judged. Yet democracy's epistemic promise is fragile. It depends on citizens and leaders alike practicing certain virtues: openness to criticism, willingness to revise one's views, and the ability to listen across disagreement. When some engage sincerely while others pursue only strategic gain, the system is distorted. Truth-seeking gives way to manipulation. The risk is not just bad outcomes, but a loss of faith in deliberation itself. Even if democracy does not guarantee truth, it can be a better method of inquiry than rule by experts or authority. But this requires both strong institutions and a civic culture committed to reasoning, not just winning. Democratic knowledge is always provisional, always contested, and always shaped by the people willing to take part in its making.

Falsifiability

Karl Popper introduced falsifiability to draw the line between science and non-science. He argued that a theory is scientific if it can be proven false in principle. This idea appears in his book 'The Logic of Scientific Discovery[54]'. For Popper, it was not enough for a theory to make predictions or seem reasonable—it had to be testable in a way that allowed it to fail. This emphasis on risk, on putting theories at stake, was central to his vision of how science should work. Popper noticed a major problem in how people try to confirm theories. If one sees a thousand white swans, it might feel safe to say all swans are white. But that is not logically sound. One black swan is all it takes to refute the claim. From this, Popper concluded that science does not grow by confirming ideas but by trying to break them. Strong theories should make bold claims—ones that could turn out to be wrong. This approach helped tackle the demarcation problem: how to tell science apart from pseudoscience. Popper's answer was that science makes falsifiable claims; pseudoscience does not. He was especially critical of theories that explained everything but predicted nothing. If no evidence can disprove a claim, then it does not belong in the scientific realm. Some philosophers, like Pierre Duhem and W\.V.O. Quine, pointed out that no test happens in a vacuum. Observations depend on other assumptions, so it is hard to isolate one theory for blame when an experiment fails. Popper acknowledged this, but insisted that his criterion was logical, not practical. The point was not that science always works in clean lab conditions—it was that theories must say something concrete enough to risk being wrong. To formalise this, Popper introduced the idea of basic statements—specific observations like 'this swan is black'. A good theory sorts these into ones it allows and ones it forbids. A single forbidden observation undermines the theory. Later developments in logic, like model theory, gave this idea a sharper edge by showing how theories could be invalidated across worlds. Falsifiability does not mean a theory has to be rejected at the first sign of trouble. In practice, anomalies often prompt revisions or better measurements. But Popper insisted that scientists should always be prepared to give up their theories if the evidence no longer fits. Scientific integrity depends on this openness to failure. In the real world, falsifiability has had broader influence. Courts have used it to decide what counts as scientific testimony. In cases like Daubert v. Merrell Dow, judges leaned on Popper's idea to separate evidence-based science

[54] Popper, K. (2002) The Logic of Scientific Discovery. Routledge.

from belief-driven claims. Still, falsifiability has limits. Some theories evolve to fit new data, and others seem too vague to be tested at all. But even with its flaws, Popper's idea continues to guide how people think about science—as a method of asking difficult questions and remaining willing to be proven wrong. Falsifiability, as Popper conceived it, relies on language to draw sharp distinctions between what can be meaningfully questioned and what cannot—requiring statements clear and precise enough to risk being disproven. Lying, by contrast, often thrives in the absence of falsifiability: it uses ambiguous or unverifiable language to evade exposure and maintain plausible deniability. In this way, falsifiability and lying mark two opposing uses of language—one grounded in the courage to be proven wrong, the other in the manipulation of truth through strategic ambiguity and concealment. Lying is often more invested in truth—or at least its appearance—than science, which, bound by falsifiability, must even question itself, while a critical attitude toward every authority remains its core moral and logical duty.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to the circular relationships between knowledge, belief, and behaviour. In both epistemology and sociology, it describes how ideas and actions feed back into each other, shaping not only society but the thinkers themselves. When beliefs cause outcomes that reinforce those beliefs, reflexivity becomes a kind of self-fulfilling loop. This idea grows more complex when religion or ideology enters the picture, as faith-based systems often resist contradiction. In a broader sense, reflexivity is about self-reference. It shows how people, through thought and analysis, can reshape their own habits, values, and identities. In the social sciences, reflexivity becomes a methodological concern. Theories about behaviour must also account for the people making those theories. For example, sociologists studying belief systems must recognise that their own thinking is shaped by similar forces. This becomes particularly clear when the act of observation changes the behaviour being observed. A fieldworker living among a remote group inevitably affects that group's culture just by being there. Reflexivity, then, shares something with the observer effect from physics. In fields like the sociology of science, this awareness becomes essential. Researchers are expected to apply the same critical tools to their own work as they do to their subjects. The idea dates to William I. Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas, who said that if people define situations as real, their consequences are real. Robert Merton expanded this into the self-fulfilling prophecy, where expectations shape reality. Karl Popper discussed something similar with his 'Oedipus effect'—a prediction that causes itself to become true. He also noted that these loops show up in biology and other sciences. Later, economists like George Soros used the idea to explain markets. Rising prices attract buyers, which raises prices even more. Eventually, the trend reverses and crashes. These feedback loops defy traditional economic models that assume markets are rational and self-correcting. Sociologists like Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu explored how reflexivity shapes identity. Giddens argued that in modern societies, people must constantly reflect on their choices, since stable traditions no longer guide life. Bourdieu pushed for researchers to be critically aware of their own biases. Michel Foucault added another layer, showing how systems of thought define the very subject doing the thinking. In anthropology, reflexivity means recognising the scholar's power over how other cultures are portrayed. It also refers to cultural self-awareness—rituals, performances, and stories that turn a society's gaze back on itself. In international relations, reflexivity has become central to post-positivist approaches. It means acknowledging one's own assumptions, questioning dominant narratives, and understanding that knowledge is always produced from a particular position. Scholars like Patrick Thaddeus Jackson see it as a foundation for critical methodology. Reflexivity challenges the idea that

social science can operate like physics. People think, reflect, and change in response to being studied. This makes the social world unstable and hard to predict. Still, researchers now use structured tools—like Audrey Alejandro's reflexive discourse analysis—to navigate this complexity and produce more honest, adaptable knowledge. Reflexivity is deeply tied to language, as it is through language that people interpret, narrate, and reshape their own beliefs and actions. Lying, as a form of reflexive speech, reveals this connection: it is not merely distortion, but a strategic use of language to manage perception—often of the self as much as of others. In this sense, reflexivity and lying are both linguistic tools through which individuals navigate social reality, continuously constructing and adjusting their identities within a web of meanings, expectations, and self-deceptions.

Double hermeneutic

The concept of the double hermeneutic, introduced by Anthony Giddens[55], captures a defining feature of the social sciences: the two-way relationship between scientific theories and everyday understanding. In this view, social science is not simply an external observer of society. It is also a participant. Its categories and explanations do not remain confined to academic texts. They seep into daily language and reshape how people see themselves and their world. A good example is 'social class'. Once a technical concept, it now shapes how individuals describe their status, aspirations, and identity. Giddens contrasts this with what he calls the 'single hermeneutic' of the natural sciences. Physicists may interpret the behaviour of atoms or gravity, but those forces do not respond or change their course based on those interpretations. In contrast, humans do. When people learn about sociological theories or economic models, they may adjust their behaviour or decisions. This means the object of study—the social world—is constantly evolving considering the theories designed to explain it. This feedback loop gives the social sciences a unique challenge. The categories they use are not static. They change as people learn them, adapt them, and use them to guide action. Giddens argues that this process is not just incidental. It is central to what makes social science distinct. It is not enough to interpret human behaviour. One must also consider how those interpretations become part of the behaviour itself. The double hermeneutic is not just a methodological insight. It also raises deeper questions about the nature of social reality. Some scholars, like Dimitri Ginev, draw a line between two approaches to the concept. One sees it as a method for studying human behaviour—a way of understanding how meaning circulates between theorist and subject. The other sees it as an ontological claim. In this view, the social world is fundamentally shaped by how it is understood. Knowledge does not merely describe society. It helps to build it. This perspective opens a space for critical reflection. If theories reshape the world, then researchers must take responsibility for how their ideas are used. Categories like 'race', 'gender', or 'deviance' are not neutral. Once adopted into public discourse, they can reinforce stereotypes or influence policy. The line between analysis and intervention becomes blurred. Giddens's idea of the double hermeneutic offers more than an abstract theory. It explains why social science has such a visible impact on society, and why that impact can be both empowering and dangerous. The very act of understanding people changes them. That is what makes the social sciences different—and what makes them so difficult to practice responsibly.

[55] Giddens, A. (1982) Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory. Macmillan.

Goodhart's Law

Goodhart's Law states that when a measure becomes a target, it stops being a good measure. Charles Goodhart[56] first expressed this idea in 1975 in the context of British monetary policy. At the time, governments tried to control the economy by targeting indicators like the money supply. But Goodhart pointed out that once these indicators were used to shape policy, they became unreliable. People adjusted their behaviour to hit the targets without achieving the underlying goals. The very act of using a measure to control something changed the nature of the measure itself. The basic insight is simple but powerful. People respond to incentives. When a specific number or metric is used to judge success, individuals and institutions find ways to game the system. The more pressure there is to meet the target, the more likely it is that the original purpose of the measure will be lost. What starts as a helpful tool for understanding a system becomes a rigid and misleading guide. Though the law bears Goodhart's name, similar warnings came earlier. In the late 1960s, Donald T. Campbell warned that social indicators used in policymaking are prone to corruption. The more they matter, the less they reflect reality. Jerome Ravetz showed how complex goals get reduced to narrow indicators, which experts can manipulate for personal or institutional gain. Robert Lucas added to this picture in 1976 with his critique of macroeconomic modeling. He argued that once people understand the rules, they adapt, and the old models no longer work. In recent years, the reach of Goodhart's Law has grown. Scholars apply it to education, science, business, and government. When schools are judged by test scores, teachers teach to the test. When scientists are judged by citations, they focus on publishable work rather than meaningful research. In finance, using risk models for regulation can lead to systemic blind spots. In each case, the measure loses its value once it becomes the goal. The law reflects a deeper tension in modern governance. Performance must be monitored, but the tools used to do so can distort behaviour. Metrics give an appearance of objectivity, but they shape the actions they are meant to observe. This makes accountability both necessary and dangerous. A measure can illuminate or mislead depending on how it is used. Understanding Goodhart's Law is essential for policy design. It reminds us that no metric is neutral. All are shaped by context and human response. Effective oversight depends not just on setting targets, but on recognising how targets change behaviour. It also calls for humility. Systems are complex, and measures are only ever partial views. The lesson is not to reject metrics entirely, but to use them with care. Measures should guide inquiry, not dictate action. When used too rigidly, they lose their purpose. When treated as tools rather than truths, they can still serve. But only if we remember that every metric is also a mirror—and it changes when we look too hard.

Campbell's Law

Campbell's law is a warning about what happens when metrics meant to monitor progress become the very goals of policy. Donald T. Campbell[57], a psychologist and social scientist, saw the danger in overrelying on quantitative indicators. He famously wrote that the more a numerical measure is used in decision-making, the more likely it is to be corrupted—and the more it will distort the system it was designed to observe. This principle can be seen across many areas of society. When organisations or governments use a single number to determine success, they create strong incentives to game the system. As attention shifts toward improving

[56] Goodhart, C. (1975) 'Problems of Monetary Management: The U.K. Experience', in Papers in Monetary Economics, Vol. 1. Sydney: Reserve Bank of Australia.
[57] Campbell, D.T. (1976) 'Assessing the Impact of Planned Social Change', Occasional Paper Series, Paper #8, The Public Affairs Center, Dartmouth College.

that number, other important aspects of performance often suffer. In trying to improve what is measured, people can end up destroying what matters. Education provides one of the clearest examples. Standardised tests were originally introduced to provide an objective view of student learning and school performance. But as test results became central to funding, evaluation, and public rankings, teachers and administrators began to change their behaviour. Instead of offering a broad education, they focused narrowly on what would appear on the tests. Some schools even resorted to cheating scandals to boost scores. The tests stopped being tools for insight and became obstacles to real learning. Campbell noted this pattern in the 1970s. Since then, it has only grown. Policymakers often turn to data in search of objectivity. They want to show progress, demonstrate efficiency, and justify their decisions. But once data becomes the main basis for judgment, it becomes a target. People adjust their actions not to improve outcomes, but to improve numbers. Other researchers have expanded on Campbell's insight. Goodhart's law, which focuses on economics and finance, offers a similar warning: any statistical regularity will break down when used as a control mechanism. The Lucas critique points out that economic models can fail when people adapt their behaviour in response to policy rules. Both echo Campbell's central message—when people know how they are being measured, they often find ways to manipulate the system. This problem is not about bad actors. Even well-meaning individuals can get caught in a cycle where they feel pressured to meet benchmarks, even if it means cutting corners. The trouble lies in treating metrics as reality rather than rough indicators. As Rebecca Boden and Debbie Epstein argued, when research is designed to support existing policies, it becomes less about discovery and more about justification. Evidence-based policymaking turns into policy-based evidence. Campbell's law serves as a reminder that data is not neutral. It shapes actions and expectations. When numbers rule decisions, they tend to warp what they were meant to represent. To avoid this, policymakers and institutions must remain critical of the tools they use. Qualitative insights, local knowledge, and diverse perspectives are essential for balance.

The Hawthorne effect

The Hawthorne effect refers to a change in people's behaviour when they know they are being watched. The idea came from a series of experiments conducted at the Hawthorne Works, a factory near Chicago, during the 1920s and 1930s. Although these studies[58] have been widely debated and reinterpreted, the basic idea—that observation alone can influence behaviour—has remained influential in psychology and social science. The original studies aimed to test how changes in working conditions affected productivity. The first was the so-called illumination study, which adjusted light levels for workers. Strangely, productivity increased whether the lighting was turned up or down. Only when lights were dimmed to near darkness did output drop. This puzzled researchers. They began to suspect that the improvements were not caused by light at all, but by something else—the feeling of being studied. Later experiments focused on a small group of women assembling electrical parts. Their breaks were changed, snacks were provided, hours shortened, and conditions altered. No matter what the change was, their productivity rose. Even reverting to old conditions produced gains. The women were being watched closely, and researchers began to believe that their sense of being special and treated with interest boosted morale and output. In a mass interviewing project that followed, thousands of workers were asked about their thoughts on work. As the interviews became more open-ended and conversational, researchers noticed that workers often responded based on group expectations, not just individual opinion. This hinted at the powerful influence of social norms.

[58] Mayo, E. (1933) The Human Problems of an Industrial Civilization. New York: Macmillan.

The final study, the bank wiring room experiment, looked at men working on a group-based payment system. Strikingly, productivity did not rise. Workers held back because they feared higher output would result in reduced pay rates. Informal group rules and peer pressure seemed stronger than financial incentives. This was a turning point in understanding workplace behaviour as shaped more by social bonds than by official policy. Over the years, critics have questioned the scientific value of the original data. Some argue that the results were exaggerated or misinterpreted. Others say the idea that being observed boosts performance was already known. Yet the term 'Hawthorne effect' stuck. It continues to remind researchers to consider how the act of observation changes outcomes. Some explanations focus on participants trying to please the researchers. Others highlight how feedback or simply being taken seriously may improve effort. More recent studies suggest these changes are often short-lived. Still, in fields from medicine to education, knowing one is being monitored can lead to temporary gains. Despite the doubts, the Hawthorne effect serves as a warning. It reminds us that human behaviour is complex and can be shaped by subtle cues. It pushes researchers to be cautious in how they interpret results and encourages them to design studies that minimise unintended influence from observation.

3. HYPOCRISY

3.1. Why hypocrisy thrives?

(Performing virtue: The morality of appearances)

'Hypocrisy is not the antithesis of morality—it is a consequence of living in a world where morality matters'.

— Michael Ignatieff, The Needs of Strangers

'People don't just want to be good—they want to look good being good'.

— Adam Grant, Give and Take

Why hypocrisy thrives

In their study 'On why hypocrisy thrives: Reasonable doubt created by moral posturing can deter punishment[59]', Jan-Erik Lönnqvist and his colleagues explore how hypocrisy can function as a shield against punishment. The focus is not on extreme deception but on subtle strategies people use to appear fair or ethical when their actions suggest otherwise. Through a series of experiments, they demonstrate how moral posturing creates just enough doubt to protect individuals from consequences, even when their insincerity is obvious. The experiments involved bargaining scenarios where participants could make an unfair choice—such as keeping more money for themselves—while using a coin flip as a justification. In most cases, responders did not believe the coin had been used. Still, they were less inclined to punish the decision-maker if the coin was mentioned. A simple mention of a process that implied fairness softened their response. Even third-party observers, who were not involved in the transaction,

[59] Lönnqvist, J.-E., Rilke, R.M. and Walkowitz, G. (2015). On why hypocrisy thrives: Reasonable doubt created by moral posturing can deter punishment. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, [online] 59, pp.139–145. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2015.04.005.

showed the same reluctance. The gesture toward fairness, despite being transparently hollow, was enough to cast doubt. This finding aligns with earlier work by Batson and others, who argue that people behave morally to protect their reputation rather than from deep moral conviction. In a well-known study, participants were given a chance to assign an undesirable task to someone else but were told they could flip a coin to decide. All participants claimed to flip the coin, yet most kept the better task for themselves. The result was not fairness but the appearance of fairness—a classic case of moral hypocrisy. Lönnqvist's research adds a new layer. It shows that even when observers suspect hypocrisy, they are reluctant to punish if the transgressor has performed a symbolic act of fairness. The reluctance to punish was not explained by laziness, confusion, or sympathy. It was the doubt created by the symbolic gesture that made the difference. This suggests that moral behaviour can be strategic, not just performative. People know they are being watched and craft their actions accordingly. The implications are broad. In everyday life, gestures of fairness—whether it is citing procedure, claiming transparency, or performing small acts of contrition—can insulate individuals and institutions from criticism. The gesture does not need to be genuine. It only needs to suggest a plausible effort toward fairness. This tolerance for moral posturing helps explain why hypocrisy is so common in politics, business, and even personal relationships. It works because people, including bystanders, hesitate to punish without clear proof of wrongdoing. Moral hypocrisy, then, is not simply a personal failing. It is a social tool. When people sense that consequences hinge on public perception, they learn to act in ways that generate just enough ambiguity. The result is a culture in which symbolic gestures outweigh ethical substance, and where appearances often matter more than intentions.

Political Hypocrisy

In 'Political Hypocrisy: The Mask of Power, from Hobbes to Orwell and Beyond[60]', David Runciman explores how hypocrisy is not merely a personal vice but a structural feature of political life. He argues that democratic societies often depend on a degree of hypocrisy—speaking ideals while acting pragmatically—to preserve stability, manage appearances, and maintain public trust, even when truth and action diverge. Hypocrisy is a word rooted in ancient Greek, where hypokrisis referred to acting on stage, feigning, or pretending. It was once a neutral term used to describe the performance of a role, especially in theater. The related word hypokritēs referred to an actor, someone who interpreted a character. But over time, this idea of assuming a false identity became linked to moral deception. By the time the term entered English around 1200, it had already taken on the meaning of pretending to be virtuous or good when one is not. Today, hypocrisy is typically understood as saying one thing and doing another. More specifically, it involves pretending to hold beliefs, values, or loyalties that a person either does not genuinely possess or fails to act on. It may also involve acting morally in public to gain praise while privately rejecting those same values. According to moral psychology, hypocrisy is not just inconsistency but a failure to live by one's own declared principles. It is the disconnect between what one says and what one does. British political thinker David Runciman describes hypocrisy as a broader pattern of false claims—about knowledge, loyalty, or even identity. These are forms of deception, and they often serve to protect social standing or gain influence. Political hypocrisy is the calculated use of a moral mask to manipulate the public for personal or political gain. It is not mere error or inconsistency, but conscious role-playing. The fascination with hypocrisy is not new. It has been a subject of

[60] Runciman, D. (2008) Political Hypocrisy: The Mask of Power, from Hobbes to Orwell and Beyond. Princeton University Press.

reflection in folk stories, philosophy, and religion for centuries. What is new is how much attention the topic now receives from behavioural science. Since the 1980s, hypocrisy has been examined in fields such as evolutionary psychology, social psychology, and cognitive science. These disciplines seek to understand why humans are so prone to acting in contradiction to their stated beliefs, and why they often fail to notice or correct such contradictions. The original Greek roots still speak to the deeper meaning of the term. Some scholars suggest that hypokrisis might be derived from hypo- meaning 'under' and krinein, meaning 'to judge' or 'to sift'. This would imply a lack of clarity or decisiveness in one's judgment, especially about oneself. The idea is that a hypocrite is someone who cannot or will not make a clear judgment about their own values. This internal confusion or self-deception helps explain why hypocrisy persists. In ancient Athens, this theatrical association was already suspect. When the orator Demosthenes mocked his rival Aeschines for having once been an actor, it was not just to insult his past. It was to suggest that his public persona was an act, that he was not to be trusted. Later Roman culture further disdained actors as untrustworthy figures, and this sentiment helped shape the modern understanding of hypocrisy as a form of moral fraud. Hypocrisy, then, is more than a character flaw. It is a social performance, an ethical failure, and often a political strategy. In every age, people seem drawn to the appearance of virtue more than its practice—and hypocrisy is the gap between those two poles. Democracy, often celebrated as government by the people, depends on a form of 'pseudocracy'—rule by managed deception. Unlike authoritarian systems that rely on force, democracy requires consent, and that consent is maintained through the careful performance of truth, not its full disclosure. To govern effectively, leaders must tell people what they want to hear, conceal compromises, and present ideals they often cannot fulfill. In this way, democracy may demand more lying than any other system. Without illusion, promises, and strategic silence, it becomes impossible to hold power or sustain public trust.

Beyond Orwell

In today's democratic politics, hypocrisy is no longer treated as a moral failure. Politicians are not condemned for saying one thing and doing another; in fact, such contradictions are increasingly viewed as part of the normal functioning of political life. In 'Political Hypocrisy: The Mask of Power, from Hobbes to Orwell and Beyond', David Runciman argues that this mismatch between words and actions is not only common—it may be necessary. Hypocrisy is now built into the very structure of liberal democracy, taking the form of "metahypocrisy"—conscious, conspicuous, and often openly acknowledged. Attempts to eliminate it usually reinforce it in new forms, making it less an exception than a governing habit. Some hypocrisy is mild and even useful, like the social politeness that smooths interaction. But political hypocrisy involves more serious deceptions: professing values one does not believe or making public commitments that are privately ignored. The term itself is theatrical—derived from ancient Greece, where a "hypocrite" was an actor—and it still carries the sense of performing a moral role without sincerity. The challenge is to discern when this performance serves responsible governance and when it tips into betrayal. Liberal democracies, by nature, make promises that are almost impossible to keep. Citizens want fairness, consistency, and truth, but also flexibility, compromise, and the avoidance of cruelty. Hypocrisy arises when leaders attempt to satisfy these incompatible demands, becoming dangerous only when it conceals fundamental violations, such as endorsing torture while claiming to defend liberty. Thinkers have long recognised this tension. Hobbes saw the mask as essential for peace, while Orwell wrestled with the distance between personal integrity and political compromise—criticising others for moral evasion but acknowledging his own limits. According to Runciman, hypocrisy is neither new nor more pervasive today; what has changed is our ability to expose it. Constant

media scrutiny creates an illusion of transparency but often deepens public cynicism. Even sincere politicians are accused of bad faith and attempts to avoid hypocrisy through ideological purity or technocratic neutrality tend to produce new variants. The more leaders insist they are free of hypocrisy, the more suspect they appear. When acknowledged and contained, hypocrisy may be part of the price of democratic life. But political hypocrisy has now moved beyond Orwell, becoming 'metahypocrisy'—a conspicuous hypocrisy. It is performance so embedded in governance that even after reading '1984', the same old lies still succeed, not because they deceive, but because they are expected. This is no longer a simple gap between word and deed, but a systemic mode of rule in which the performance of truth is ritualised, and its failure normalised. At this stage, democracy risks sliding into 'pseudocracy'—a system sustained not despite hypocrisy, but through it, where public life runs on scripted virtue and managed deception. Hypocrisy emerges as the governing principle of political language.

Technologies of truth

In 'Cultural Citizenship and the Popular Media[61]', Toby Miller examines how visual media shape public understanding of truth, identity, and political belonging. From the Rodney King video to documentaries like 'The Times of Harvey Milk', media have not simply reflected events but actively shaped the narratives around them. They do this through framing, selection, and omission. As a result, mass media become not just tools for communication but technologies of governance. Reality, perception, and public opinion are shaped through curated images and controlled narratives. The end goal of mass media's manipulation of imagery does not merely distort truth—it redefines language. It produces a world where the real is inseparable from its representation, and where public opinion is sculpted from selective visibility. In such a world, 'pseudocracy'—rule by the performance of truth—thrives, sustained by a visual field that commands belief while concealing its own construction. In democratic societies, where consent must be maintained rather than enforced, visual media function as instruments of persuasion, embedding ideology in the very fabric of public memory. The Rodney King video, often cited as undeniable evidence of police brutality, became a case study in how visual truth is manipulated. Slow motion, selective framing, and rhetorical interpretation by the defence team transformed King's suffering into a performance of threat, persuading a jury to accept visible violence as lawful restraint. The footage did not speak on its own; it had to be taught to say what power needed it to say. This transformation of raw image into ideological message is not limited to courtroom strategies. Documentaries like 'The Times of Harvey Milk' construct emotional, polished portrayals that mobilise public sympathy while omitting inconvenient details—sanitising history in service of moral clarity. Even allegedly educational content, such as the PBS series 'The Americas', reveals how political pressure distorts meaning. The original British version portrayed Latin American revolutionaries as complex actors in their historical context. The American edit, shaped by Cold War ideology, repackaged those same movements as mere threats to Western order. The shift in narrative did not just alter the facts—it reshaped public language, recoding rebellion as terrorism and solidarity as danger. Through such techniques, mass media produce what might be called 'synthetic citizenship'—a sense of identity and belonging built on symbolic participation rather than informed engagement. Visual media train viewers not only in what to believe but how to speak, what to remember, and what to forget. They supply the imagery through which people interpret social life, offering prepackaged moral scripts in place of critical reflection. As Edward Markey warned, this creates an 'informational apartheid', where digital access and media literacy determine who gets to

[61] Miller, T. (2007) Cultural Citizenship and the Popular Media. Temple University Press.

participate in the public sphere and who remains voiceless. In this environment, lies do not need to appear as lies. They arrive embedded in images, tone, pacing, and omission. They operate not by outright contradiction but by framing: showing part of the truth in a way that distorts the whole. As entertainment, news, and ideology blur into one visual stream, language becomes saturated with borrowed phrases, manipulated sympathies, and rehearsed outrage. The public learns to feel before it thinks, to react before it understands. Media become not just technologies of communication, but mechanisms of control—shaping what is seen, what can be said, and what can be imagined. In today's media-saturated world, a fake image can become accepted truth simply because millions have seen it—on television, in cinemas, or on their phones. Repetition across platforms lends the image credibility, not because of its accuracy, but because of its visibility. Once internalised by large audiences, these images produce strong and stable opinions that people not only believe but feel compelled to share across social networks. This is the true power of what might be called 'technologies of truth': not to inform, but to implant. The final goal is not the image itself, but its echo—how it rewires inner speech, shapes moral instincts, and generates reflexive slogans that activate automatically whenever a certain face, name, or scene appears. Names like Rodney King, George Floyd, or Greta Thunberg no longer refer simply to people—they trigger emotional and ideological scripts. Just as Pavlov's dog salivated at the bell, people now respond to images with conditioned phrases, ready-made opinions, and a sense of certainty that feels like knowledge but was carefully manufactured through language. Truth repeated by millions becomes a parrot's song—loud, hollow, and believed because it never stops.

Organisational hypocrisy

In his 2006 article 'Organisational Hypocrisy [62]', Robert Charette explores how institutions often present one face to the public while operating quite differently behind the scenes. Drawing on the work of Swedish economist Nils Brunsson, Charette describes this disconnect as 'organisational hypocrisy'. It occurs when what organisations say, what they decide, and what they do are not aligned. While this may sound like deceit, Charette suggests it can be a survival mechanism, especially when an institution faces conflicting pressures. Many public agencies are caught in contradictions they cannot easily escape. Take the Federal Aviation Administration. It is responsible for promoting air travel while also safeguarding passenger safety. These goals often clash. As a result, the agency sometimes only acts decisively after a major accident, which damages its credibility. But this delay is not always due to negligence. It reflects the reality of balancing commercial, political, and safety concerns in an environment full of competing demands. Organisational hypocrisy plays out both in public view and behind closed doors. Externally, it affects how trustworthy an institution appears. Internally, it affects how employees feel about their work. Workers often notice when management makes lofty promises but cuts corners in practice. Job ads describe inspiring roles, while day-to-day tasks are often mundane or poorly supported. Speeches about innovation ring hollow when budgets are slashed and resources disappear. NASA's recent handling of budget cuts offers a clear example. The agency's leadership described the reductions in space science and astrobiology as 'temporary speed bumps'. But many scientists and engineers saw them as long-term threats to meaningful research. This kind of minimisation undermines trust. It makes workers feel dismissed. When reality no longer matches the story told from the top, morale breaks down. People begin to tune out, or worse, leave. If the gap between words and actions

[62] Charette, R. (2006) Organizational Hypocrisy. Government Executive; Washington Vol. 38, Iss. 7, (May 1, 2006): 68,70.

grows too wide, the result is systemic dysfunction. Leaders begin to inhabit a different reality than their workforce. Employees no longer believe what they are told. Cynicism spreads. The organisation becomes incapable of reform from within. This kind of breakdown is not always visible until a crisis occurs. In ordinary times, the system may 'muddle through'. But when pressure mounts, the cracks widen fast. The response to Hurricane Katrina revealed how deep the dysfunction could go. FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security failed to coordinate a timely response. Yet President Bush publicly praised FEMA's performance. The contradiction was so stark that it shattered any remaining public trust. Once exposed, organisational hypocrisy is hard to repair. Even genuine reform efforts face suspicion. The damage is not just to reputation but to the internal coherence of the agency. Charette argues that some degree of hypocrisy is unavoidable. But when it grows unchecked, it threatens the very stability of the institution. Organisations that survive long term should be those that strive to keep rhetoric and reality as close as possible. That means acknowledging limits, making difficult choices openly, and speaking plainly—even when the truth is uncomfortable. But is it more important for an organisation to endure, or for its ruling elite to exploit hypocrisy for profit and success? If there are no consequences for lying, they can abandon the organisation entirely and start a new one whenever it suits them. In the end, it is merely a matter of changing the names on the office door.

Truth as a pretence

In his essay 'Truth as a Pretence[63]', James A. Woodbridge presents a striking idea: the concept of truth, as commonly used in language, works more like a pretence than a description of some real property. He does not argue that pretending something is truly makes it so. Rather, he suggests that truth-talk functions within a framework of make-believe, much like fictional storytelling. This approach, a form of fictionalism, allows language to express ideas more flexibly without committing to truth as a metaphysical property. The core of Woodbridge's argument is that when people say things like 'What Bob said is true', they are not pointing to a real property called truth. Instead, they are using a kind of linguistic shortcut. This pretence enables useful generalisations that would otherwise be awkward or impossible to express. For example, rather than repeating each individual statement Bob made, one can simply say, 'Everything Bob says is true'. That form of speech relies on a background fiction—that 'truth' is a real quality that statements can have. To make this clearer, Woodbridge draws on Kendall Walton's theory of make-believe. Walton's idea explains how children's games work through agreed-upon pretences. In a game, a patch of mud can be a 'pie', and placing it in a hollow stump can count as 'baking'. These rules are not real but accepted within the fiction. Similarly, in everyday discourse, phrases like 'is true' behave as if they describe something real, even though no such property exists. According to Woodbridge, this use of pretence explains how language can generalise and organise information efficiently. It also helps resolve philosophical problems, like the Liar Paradox. In that case, the statement 'This sentence is not true' leads to a contradiction if taken seriously. But if truth is a pretence, then the sentence is part of a fictional structure and does not refer to anything real. As a result, it does not generate a logical problem, because it is not actually claiming anything about the world. Woodbridge also addresses a criticism: that pretence might still depend on some understanding of truth. For example, someone might argue that to pretend something is the case, one must already know what it means for something to be true. He answers this by redefining pretence without using the idea

[63] Woodbridge, J.A. (2021). Truth as a Pretense. [online] Philpapers.org. Available at: https://philpapers.org/rec/WOOTAA-3 [Accessed 23 Jul. 2025].

of truth. To pretend that X has a feature F is simply to act as if it does, regardless of whether it really does or not. In this way, pretence can operate independently of any assumed concept of truth. Woodbridge's approach offers a new path through old philosophical debates. Instead of treating truth as a mysterious or elusive property, his theory sees it as a practical device embedded in how people talk. This device helps organise knowledge, smooth communication, and avoid unnecessary complexity. Truth, then, is less an objective feature of statements than a way of speaking—a useful fiction that keeps language running.

'Not In My Name'

In 'A Compendium of Modern Hypocrisy[64]', Julie Burchill and Chas Newkey-Burden dissect the contradictions of contemporary moral posturing. Today's hypocrisy is not limited to conservative figures caught betraying their public values. It now flourishes among those who present themselves as progressive, liberal, and ethically enlightened. These individuals often express solidarity with causes that, on closer inspection, conflict with their own stated principles. The phrase 'Not In My Name', chanted during the Iraq War protests, became a slogan for self-identification rather than solidarity. Protesters, enjoying the freedoms of liberal democracies, stood against efforts to extend those freedoms elsewhere. They decried surveillance in their own countries while ignoring the brutality of regimes where dissent results in imprisonment or execution. Some later even aligned themselves with Hezbollah, a group whose ideology clashes with the very values these activists claimed to uphold—gender equality, free speech, and LGBTQ+ rights. Burchill and Newkey-Burden note that this is not merely inconsistent—it is a fundamental betrayal of moral clarity. The irony is sharp: groups like Hezbollah are not hypocrites. Their actions, however objectionable, are consistent with their beliefs. The double standard lies with those who condemn Western liberal democracies while excusing or romanticising the violence and repression of authoritarian movements. This hypocrisy also extends into personal behaviour. Critics of consumer culture indulge in luxury; those who denounce classism sneer at the working class; environmental activists travel the world by plane while lecturing others about carbon footprints. Moral signalling often becomes a way of feeling righteous without confronting personal contradiction. Nowhere is this more evident than in attitudes toward Israel and the Middle East. Israel, a democracy with protections for minorities and progressive social policies, is relentlessly condemned. Meanwhile, regimes with deeply misogynistic and homophobic laws are treated with cautious respect or ignored entirely. Palestinian suffering is highlighted only when Israel is involved, while atrocities committed by Arab governments are met with silence. The same selective outrage applies to Cuba. Guantanamo Bay attracts widespread criticism, yet the decades-long oppression of dissidents and minorities under Castro receives little attention. Che Guevara is still lionised in popular culture despite his record of violence and repression. Political heroes are chosen not for their deeds but for their symbolic value to a particular ideology. Even American presidents are judged with partisan inconsistency. George W. Bush's efforts in Africa are overlooked, while his verbal blunders are endlessly mocked. Bill Clinton, who did less for African aid, is praised as the more enlightened leader. Anti-American sentiment often coexists with a deep fascination for American culture, media, and politics. Critics who condemn U.S. foreign policy obsess over American elections while ignoring oppressive regimes closer to home. What emerges from Burchill and Newkey-Burden's account is a troubling picture: modern hypocrisy thrives on selective outrage and performative virtue. Activism becomes less about principles and more

[64] Burchill, J. and Newkey-Burden, C. (2006) A Compendium of Modern Hypocrisy. Harper Perennial.

about identity, signalling membership in a moral tribe. In this environment, truth becomes secondary to narrative, and contradiction is no longer a flaw but a feature.

Hypocrisy and the philosophical intentions

Jean-Jacques Rousseau remains one of the most enigmatic figures in the history of philosophy. He spoke passionately of civic virtue, natural goodness, and the moral life, yet his personal choices often contradicted these ideals. The most infamous example is his decision to abandon his children to an orphanage, even while writing about the sanctity of family. Rousseau also promoted public engagement but frequently withdrew from society, feuded with friends, and became increasingly paranoid and isolated. These contradictions have shaped what scholars call the 'Jean-Jacques problem'—the tension between the man and his message. In 'The Jean-Jacques Problem[65]' Matthew D. Mendham revisits this issue by questioning whether Rousseau's personal failings undermine his philosophical contributions. The divide between thought and action in Rousseau's life has sparked three main responses. One insists that his ideas must be judged apart from his personal conduct. Another suggests that his hypocrisy discredits his philosophy entirely. A third, more nuanced view proposes that Rousseau himself was aware of his inconsistencies and wrestled with them, making his work a record of both aspiration and failure. During the height of his intellectual productivity in the 1750s and early 1760s, Rousseau tried to live according to his principles. He rejected material wealth, gave to the poor, and defended the republican spirit of Geneva. He believed moral reformers should practice what they preached, openly criticising writers who failed to do so. But his exile from France, the exposure of his personal secrets, and his bitter stay in England with David Hume marked a turning point. Instead of continuing to strive for coherence, Rousseau began defending his personal flaws by invoking the idea of natural innocence. His confessional writings no longer modelled virtue but offered excuses. Figures like Edmund Burke viewed Rousseau as emblematic of a new kind of moral danger—someone who preached civic virtue while feeding a cult of self. Burke considered Rousseau a source of the radicalism that would erupt in the French Revolution. His autobiography, intended as a moral defence, only confirmed the image of a man who admired virtue in theory but fell short in practice. This raises a philosophical dilemma: Can someone who fails to live by their principles still offer moral guidance? For Seneca, the answer was yes—moral growth was an ongoing process, and imperfections did not cancel aspiration. Socrates, by contrast, believed philosophy had to be lived. Rousseau seems to have held the Socratic view in his early years, insisting on the alignment of belief and behaviour. Yet later, he drifted into rationalisation. Rousseau's legacy, then, lies not in his moral perfection but in the drama of his contradictions. His struggle between conviction and conduct is neither a disproof of his thought nor a mere personal weakness. Instead, it reflects a deeper truth about human nature and the burden of consistency. Jean-Jacques Rousseau began his philosophical life with a strong desire to live by the ideals he promoted. He wrote of virtue, civic responsibility, and moral rigor, believing that a good society could only be built on the foundation of upright individuals. In his early writings, he encouraged self-discipline, duty to the republic, and personal sacrifice for the greater good. For a time, he tried to live this way. He rejected material comfort, supported Geneva's republican ideals, and criticised those who preached virtue but lived selfishly. But Rousseau's life took a turn. Exiled from France, shamed for abandoning his children, and increasingly isolated, he changed. His later works no longer urged others toward strict moral standards. Instead, they focused on defending himself. He framed his solitude not as a failing but as a necessity, a response to a corrupt and hostile world.

[65] Mendham, M. D. (2011) The Jean-Jacques Problem. American Journal of Political Science, 55(3).

The man who once praised public duty began to turn inward, finding virtue in natural goodness and withdrawing from the demands of society. Rousseau's philosophy became less about prescribing virtue and more about recognising the difficulty of achieving it. His life and writings reflect an ongoing tension between what he believed and what he could live.

The problem of inauthenticity

In his study of identity and social behaviour 'Status and Identity: The Problem of Inauthenticity[66]', Melvin Seeman examines how inauthenticity arises when individuals struggle to reconcile personal identity with the roles society assigns them. Drawing on existentialist thought, especially Jean-Paul Sartre's reflections in 'Anti-Semite and Jew', Seeman explores how the pressure to escape an imposed identity leads to self-distortion. Sartre described how some Jews, in response to anti-Semitism, tried either to disavow their identity or embody it in exaggerated ways. Seeman expands this idea to a wider range of social contexts, focusing on how status can distort self-understanding. He presents several cases that reflect this problem. A Black man might adjust his speech or demeanour to avoid confirming racial stereotypes. Another might emphasise those same traits in a performative way. A school administrator may project confidence in public while privately doubting his ability. A university professor may minimise his intellectual identity in social settings to avoid being labelled arrogant or disconnected. Each of these examples shows how individuals, in navigating their social environment, often hide or reshape aspects of themselves, resulting in internal conflict. Seeman outlines three patterns through which inauthenticity appears. First is the acceptance of negative stereotypes, often unconsciously. For example, Black children might associate light skin with higher status or positive traits, internalising a harmful social narrative. Second is defensive overcompensation. Here, individuals try to distance themselves from a stereotype by behaving in the opposite direction, which may create a distorted version of the self. Third is self-deception, when people internalise an idealised image of their role or status and suppress any feelings that contradict it. This is common in institutional roles, where expectations are clear but inner experiences are more complex. What makes authenticity difficult, Seeman argues, is that identity is not formed in isolation. Social roles, expectations, and feedback constantly shape how individuals see themselves. Sartre's model, which defines inauthenticity as fleeing from one's imposed identity, risks turning identity into a fixed object—something you must either accept or reject. Anatole Broyard offered a different view, focusing on remaining true to a supposed 'essential self', but this too overlooks the social construction of identity. Seeman proposes a more balanced position. Authenticity requires self-awareness—recognising how society influences self-perception, without becoming a mere reflection of those influences. It involves resisting imposed definitions while acknowledging that identity is partly relational. To be authentic is not to isolate oneself from others, but to maintain integrity in the face of external pressures. In the end, Seeman sees inauthenticity as a common outcome of navigating a complex society. The pressure to conform or resist often leads to distortion, misunderstanding, and self-alienation. His analysis offers a way to understand how individuals lose touch with themselves in the effort to meet or escape the expectations tied to their social status.

3.2. Organised hypocrisy

(The systemic logic of hypocrisy: Institutions and the performance of integrity)

[66] Seeman, M. (1966) Status and Identity: The Problem of Inauthenticity. Sociometry, 29(1).

'Organisations often talk like idealists, decide like pragmatists, and act like opportunists'.

— Martha Finnemore, Rules for the World

'Hypocrisy in institutions is not a bug—it is often a functional adaptation to contradictory pressures'.

— David Mathews, The Ecology of Democracy

Organisational deception

In their study 'Organisational Contexts, Social Relations and Types of Lying[67]', Sarah Jenkins and Rick Delbridge examine how lying functions within organisational life. While lying is often seen as a personal failure or a moral issue, their research shows that it is also a structured, social behaviour shaped by workplace demands. People lie not only for themselves but also for the sake of their roles, colleagues, or employers. Understanding organisational deception requires looking beyond individual motives and into the systems that make lying seem necessary or even acceptable. The paper defines lying as a deliberate attempt to mislead. But it does not treat all lies the same. Lies differ depending on their purpose and the environment in which they are told. They organise lies into four types: principled, defensive, material, and malicious. Each reflects a different set of motives and consequences. Principled lies are told to protect others or uphold certain values. Defensive lies are used to survive in a workplace where expectations clash with reality. Material lies aim to gain something concrete, like money. Malicious lies are told to harm others or gain power. These lies do not arise randomly. They emerge from specific organisational contexts. Some workplaces reward deception; others simply tolerate it. In some cases, employees are pressured to lie as part of their job. In call centres, for example, workers might be told to hide their real location or pretend to be someone they are not. In sales environments, misleading customers may be encouraged to meet targets. In other settings, lying can become a kind of skill, used to present a polished image or manage difficult interactions. Social relationships—whether marked by cooperation, competition, or distrust—also affect how lies are used and justified. The study also includes detailed case studies. In one, call centre employees were pushed to lie to customers to meet strict performance goals, creating tension and dissatisfaction. In another, workers in Indian call centres were forced to hide their identities to cater to Western clients, resulting in emotional strain. Sales workers in a retail environment exaggerated claims to close deals, believing this behaviour was expected. In contrast, workers at a virtual receptionist service found meaning in small lies that helped them deliver a seamless experience. These examples show that deception in the workplace is not just about ethics; it is also about survival, performance, and professionalism. Lying in organisations should be seen as a complex and often rational response to workplace conditions. People do not simply choose to lie—they respond to pressures, incentives, and social expectations. Lying becomes part of the job, part of the culture, and sometimes even part of one’s identity as a worker.

[67] Jenkins, S. and Delbridge, R. (2017) Organizational Contexts, Social Relations and Types of Lying. Journal of Organizational Ethnography, 6(3).

The logic of noble lies

In 'Picking Sides in the War on Virtue[68]', Jeremy Lott offers a defence of hypocrisy, arguing that it is often misunderstood and too easily condemned. While many view hypocrisy as a clear moral failing, Lott suggests that it can sometimes play a productive role in society. He draws on the ideas of ethicist Max Scheler, who believed that even when people fail to live up to their ideals, their public commitment to those ideals still holds value. A society where people pretend to be good is preferable to one where people reject goodness altogether. Lott challenges the idea that only the morally perfect have the right to speak about virtue. This 'saint or shut up' attitude, he argues, discourages moral growth. Instead, he sees hypocrisy as a sign that people still recognise the importance of moral standards, even when they fall short. For instance, the Founding Fathers owned slaves, but their declaration that all men are created equal laid the foundation for the eventual abolition of slavery. Their failure to live up to their ideals did not invalidate the ideals themselves. Historical examples like St. Paul show how moral contradictions can still lead to progress. Paul supported Roman authority yet preached spiritual equality. These mixed messages helped lay the groundwork for the future dismantling of slavery in Europe. In modern times, when a politician protects his child from drug charges despite having supported strict laws, it may seem hypocritical—but Lott sees it as a reflection of human loyalty, not simple moral failure. Hypocrisy, Lott argues, should not always be condemned. It often reflects an aspiration to do better, even when people fall short. In this sense, hypocrisy may be less a vice than a flawed but useful path toward moral progress. Organised hypocrisy thrives because people are remarkably skilled at rationalising deception when it serves a cause they believe is just. Rather than confronting contradictions, individuals and institutions often structure them into daily operations, convincing themselves that lies, double standards, and selective virtue are necessary trade-offs for achieving a greater good. Jonathan Rauch expands this view in his discussion of 'Hidden Law'—the unwritten norms that govern society beneath formal rules. He contrasts this with 'Bureaucratic Legalism', a rigid system that insists on full transparency and consistency. Hidden Law allows for discretion. It recognises that strict adherence to formal rules can be destructive, especially when it comes to human behaviour. In matters like school discipline, speech regulation, or even end-of-life care, hypocrisy once allowed for flexibility. Attempts to codify every moral rule have often produced harsher, less humane results. Rauch points to events like the Clinton impeachment to show how rigid moral enforcement can backfire. Despite Clinton's personal failings, the public preferred to tolerate the hypocrisy rather than remove a president over a private matter. In the case of assisted suicide, what was once handled discreetly through informal compassion became legally inaccessible under regulation. In this context, hypocrisy is not merely tolerated but institutionalised—embedded in the rituals of politics, morality, and social discourse—where saying the right thing matters more than doing it and believing in a cause justifies any contradiction required to defend it. Organised hypocrisy becomes a virtue when public loyalty to ideals is valued more than private consistency, allowing contradictions to be framed as moral commitment rather than failure.

Hypocrisy and moral ambiguity

In 'Dissociation, Shame, and the Ethics of Inauthenticity[69]', Ronald C. Naso explores the psychological roots of hypocrisy and self-deception. Far from being a rare or purely pathological condition, dissociation—an experience often linked to hypocrisy—appears in

[68] Lott, J. (2006) Picking Sides in the War on Virtue. Thomas Nelson.
[69] Naso, R. C. (2010) Dissociation, Shame, and the Ethics of Inauthenticity. Routledge.

everyday life. Forgetting whether one has shampooed their hair or arriving at a destination without recalling the drive are examples of common dissociative episodes. These moments, though mundane, reveal how easily the mind can split awareness and action. Dissociation exists on a spectrum. At one end are harmless lapses in memory or attention. At the other are serious disorders involving identity disruption or emotional numbing. Researchers like Cardeña and Wiener describe two main types of dissociation: compartmentalisation, where mental processes that should be integrated remain separate, and detachment, where individuals feel cut off from their emotions or surroundings. These are not always signs of illness. They can be normal responses to fatigue or stress. But when persistent or extreme, they suggest deeper conflict. This splitting of awareness is closely tied to hypocrisy. Hypocrisy often arises from the need to avoid shame and protect the self from painful truths. Rather than lying outright, the hypocrite may unconsciously separate their public behaviour from private motives. They may believe in what they say while doing the opposite, not out of manipulation but because they cannot fully face the contradiction. The mind maintains a sense of coherence by keeping conflicting truths apart. Self-deception allows people to both know and not know uncomfortable facts at the same time. This creates moral ambiguity, as individuals avoid responsibility while clinging to a virtuous image. Dissociation, in this light, becomes a tool for managing ethical discomfort. Psychoanalyst Philip Bromberg takes this further, suggesting that we all inhabit multiple 'self-states'. These selves are shaped by different experiences and can coexist without full awareness of each other. When one self takes over, others recede. This helps explain how people can behave in contradictory ways and still feel consistent. The hypocrite is not always acting; they are often caught between incompatible versions of themselves. In this view, hypocrisy is not simple deceit but a form of adaptation. It reflects an effort to maintain stability in the face of inner conflict and external demands. The mask the hypocrite wears protects them from shame and the fear of rejection. It offers social approval while shielding the fragile self behind it. Naso uses the metaphor of masks to describe how hypocrisy operates. Masks can allow for transformation, adaptation, and social ease. But they can also conceal harmful motives and prevent self-reflection. Wearing a mask too long can lead to confusion between appearance and reality. The danger lies not in the mask itself, but in forgetting it is there. Hypocrisy often shields individuals from shame. Those who fear being exposed as inadequate or unworthy may perform moral virtue to maintain social approval. Over time, this performance becomes habitual. The hypocrite convinces others—and often themselves—that they are the person they appear to be. This dissociation, where conflicting realities are kept apart, allows them to function without confronting the ethical dissonance beneath the surface. Hypocrisy is not always harmful. In politics and public life, it can serve as a social lubricant. A public official might conceal controversial views to build consensus or secure funding for a greater good. In such cases, hypocrisy can enable cooperation or prevent greater harm. Hypocrisy often arises not from malice but from the difficult task of reconciling competing truths. It is a way of coping with moral expectations that feel impossible to meet. Understanding hypocrisy as a psychological defence, rather than a moral collapse, helps explain why it is so persistent and difficult to confront. It reveals a complex effort to preserve self-image, navigate social pressures, and avoid painful truths.

The politics of politeness

In 'Manners and Morals from Locke to Austen[70]', Jenny Davidson explores how hypocrisy was not always seen as a moral failure but sometimes as a necessary feature of polite society.

[70] Davidson, J. (2004) Manners and Morals from Locke to Austen. Oxford University Press.

In the eighteenth century, hypocrisy and politeness were linked. Social life depended on manners that often masked true feelings. These polite performances, while insincere, were essential for maintaining peace and order. Without them, families, institutions, and governments risked collapse. Hypocrisy, then, was not always condemned; it was, in some circles, quietly respected. Eighteenth-century writers such as Swift, Hume, and Burke defended civility, even when it required dissembling. They saw politeness as a stabilising force in society. Critics accused them of justifying falsehood, but their defence was pragmatic: better a society held together by polite hypocrisy than one torn apart by blunt honesty. Davidson shows how these thinkers believed that imitating virtue, even if insincere, could lead to the real thing. Habit, they argued, has the power to shape character. Samuel Johnson and later thinkers like William James extended this idea, suggesting that repeated performance of virtue could become second nature. This culture of politeness had clear exclusions. Politeness was not available to everyone in the same way. It depended on class and gender. For women, politeness was not just encouraged; it was required. Female behaviour was shaped by expectations of modesty, self-restraint, and silence. In novels like Austen's 'Mansfield Park', women's hypocrisy—expressed through tact and reserve—was not merely tolerated but sometimes portrayed as a necessary form of survival. Women were judged more harshly for impoliteness than for insincerity. Davidson also discusses the political uses of hypocrisy. During the revolution debates of the 1790s, Burke defended chivalry and politeness, while Wollstonecraft called for a new kind of female sincerity. Yet even she, Davidson argues, remained committed to a broader ethic of decency. The tension between public civility and private conviction was not easily resolved. The servant question further complicates the story. Jonathan Swift, in 'A Project for the Advancement of Religion', defended hypocrisy as a kind of social armour for the elite but condemned it in servants. The metaphor 'the livery of religion' suggested virtue when worn by gentlemen and deceit when worn by the lower classes. This double standard reveals the class dimension of hypocrisy. What was considered a graceful disguise for one class became suspicious behaviour in another. Davidson's analysis shows how politeness operated as both a moral and political language. It helped individuals navigate power structures while also enforcing social hierarchies. Politeness offered a script for belonging but came at a cost, especially for those without social privilege. Hypocrisy, viewed through this lens, becomes less a personal flaw and more a tool for negotiating impossible demands.

Organised hypocrisy of foreign policy

In their article 'The Organised Hypocrisy of Ethical Foreign Policy[71]', Richard Perkins and Eric Neumayer explore how Western states routinely promote human rights and democracy while continuing to sell arms to authoritarian regimes. They define this institutionalised contradiction as 'organised hypocrisy', where moral ideals are publicly affirmed but privately undermined to serve strategic and economic interests. In recent years, Western governments have increasingly spoken of foreign policy in ethical terms. Promoting democracy and human rights abroad is presented as a guiding principle. Yet, when it comes to the arms trade, this moral stance collapses under scrutiny. States like the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the United States continue to export weapons to regimes with questionable human rights records. These actions suggest that ethical concerns are often subordinated to economic and strategic interests. The term 'ethical foreign policy' gained traction in the 1990s, signalling a shift away from Cold War-era realpolitik. Leaders began using the language of morality to

[71] Perkins, R. and Neumayer, E. (2010). The organized hypocrisy of ethical foreign policy: Human rights, democracy and Western arms sales. Geoforum, 41(2), pp.247–256.

frame their international decisions. However, the continuation of arms deals with authoritarian or repressive regimes undermines the sincerity of such commitments. Weapons are regularly supplied to governments that stifle dissent, suppress civil liberties, or engage in internal conflict. These sales are justified with vague references to regional stability or counterterrorism, masking the deeper motivations of profit and influence. The concept 'organised hypocrisy' describes a situation in which states maintain a formal commitment to certain norms while simultaneously violating them in practice. In the context of arms sales, ethical language becomes a diplomatic tool rather than a genuine standard. States appear committed to moral ideals, but only when doing so aligns with their interests. When it does not, ethics are sidelined, and deals proceed as usual. This pattern reveals a structural issue in international politics. Arms exports are deeply embedded in national economies and defence industries. Thousands of jobs depend on continued production and trade, and governments are often reluctant to sacrifice this economic benefit. Additionally, arms sales serve geopolitical objectives—securing alliances, countering rivals, or gaining leverage. These strategic motivations frequently outweigh the moral costs of empowering regimes that violate the very values the West claims to champion. Often the application of ethical standards is selective. Countries critical of human rights abuses in one context may ignore or even support them elsewhere. This inconsistency further damages the credibility of ethical foreign policy. Rather than being a universal framework, it functions more as a rhetorical shield—useful when confronting adversaries, but dispensable when dealing with allies or trading partners. In conclusion, the notion of an ethical foreign policy often fails to withstand real-world pressures. The ongoing arms trade with authoritarian states illustrates the gap between proclaimed values and actual behaviour. While Western leaders continue to speak of democracy and human rights, their actions reveal a different priority: the pursuit of economic gain and strategic power. This gap is not accidental but organised—a systematic form of hypocrisy that shapes international relations today.

Organised hypocrisy and international organisations

In 'The Organisation of Hypocrisy: Talk, Decisions and Actions in Organisations[72]' (1989), Nils Brunsson explores how modern organisations maintain legitimacy by decoupling what they say, decide, and do—engaging in systematic hypocrisy as a functional response to conflicting external demands. Rather than viewing this as dysfunction, Brunsson argues that such inconsistency is often necessary for organisations to survive in complex institutional environments. International organisations have long been subject to criticism for failing to live up to their stated ideals. On one side, they are praised as mechanisms of global cooperation. On the other, they are accused of contradiction and duplicity. In their article, researchers explore the idea that this inconsistency is not simply a failure of will or principle. Instead, it is a structural feature of how these organisations operate within a fragmented world of conflicting expectations. From the League of Nations to the modern United Nations, international organisations have promised peace, stability, and shared governance. Yet their actions often fall short. The UN may declare a commitment to human rights, while remaining silent during acts of genocide. The World Bank may promote economic justice while enforcing austerity policies that hurt the most vulnerable. These discrepancies are often labelled as hypocrisy. But the concept of 'organised hypocrisy' provides a deeper explanation. Rather than assuming bad faith, it suggests that such contradictions result from the impossible demands placed on institutions trying to satisfy multiple stakeholders at once. The theory comes from Nils Brunsson's work

[72] Brunsson, N. (1989) The Organization of Hypocrisy: Talk, Decisions and Actions in Organizations, Wiley.

on organisations that must operate in environments full of conflicting pressures. He argues that talk, decision, and action are often decoupled—not because of deception, but as a survival mechanism. For example, an organisation may issue strong statements about peace while authorising aggressive interventions. These contradictions are not accidental. They allow the institution to speak to different audiences—governments, NGOs, the public—without collapsing under the weight of conflicting demands. Stephen Krasner's version of the theory adds a political dimension. He focuses on how states behave under pressure from international norms, especially regarding sovereignty. Leaders often uphold these norms in speeches while ignoring them in practice. This too is a kind of organised hypocrisy—not a lie, but a way of managing the tension between ideology and realpolitik. These insights are particularly visible in peacekeeping missions. The UN talks of neutrality, consent, and limited force. Yet recent operations—whether in Congo, Haiti, or Mali—have involved actions that break from these principles. The gap between stated norms and actual conduct becomes a space where necessary but controversial actions can occur. While this flexibility may allow the UN to respond more effectively, it also damages its legitimacy. The organisation's credibility suffers when words no longer match reality. Organised hypocrisy, then, is not just a flaw. It can be a function—enabling global institutions to move forward in a fractured world. However, this same mechanism can lead to stagnation, distrust, and eventual ineffectiveness. The challenge is to recognise when this kind of strategic inconsistency is useful, and when it becomes corrosive. In the end, the dilemmas of global governance cannot be resolved by purifying rhetoric or enforcing rigid consistency. Instead, they demand a more honest engagement with the complexities of international politics and a careful balance between principle and pragmatism.

Organisational hypocrisy in business schools

Many business schools today proudly claim to prepare students for a sustainable future. They sign global declarations like the UN's Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), and they speak of aligning economic success with environmental and social responsibility. Yet these promises often to remain disconnected from the actual structure and content of their educational programs. In 'Organisational Hypocrisy in Business Schools with Sustainability Commitments[73]', Annie C. Snelson-Powell, along with Johanne Grosvold and Andrew Millington, explores this gap between public commitment and institutional action, drawing on interviews with MBA directors across UK schools to understand the forces driving this inconsistency. This gap—what scholars call organisational hypocrisy—is not always rooted in deliberate deception. Often, it reflects internal challenges. For example, limited resources, lack of expertise in sustainability, or deeply embedded institutional traditions can prevent meaningful change. Some schools express a genuine interest in sustainable management but lack the capacity or flexibility to alter established curricula. Others might feel constrained by external accreditation systems or rankings that prioritise financial performance and prestige over social responsibility. Snelson-Powell's study shows that talk-action inconsistency is frequently unintentional. Still, its effects are real. When schools publicise sustainability values but fail to deliver, they risk undermining their credibility. Students may leave with a superficial understanding of sustainability, and employers may question the relevance of sustainability training. In these ways, organisational hypocrisy—even when unintended—can have long-term consequences. Interestingly, larger, and more prestigious schools appear more vulnerable to this problem. Their reputations depend heavily on public image, and so they may feel pressure

[73] Snelson-Powell, A. et al. (2020) 'Organizational Hypocrisy in Business Schools with Sustainability Commitments', Journal of Business Ethics, 162(4), pp. 825–842.

to adopt popular sustainability language while keeping internal change to a minimum. This creates a performance dynamic where sustainability becomes more of a public relations tool than an educational priority. The concept of organised hypocrisy, first developed by Nils Brunsson, helps explain this behaviour. It describes how organisations separate what they say, what they decide, and what they do to manage conflicting expectations. For business schools, this means expressing commitment to sustainability to satisfy students, partners, and accreditation bodies—while continuing to teach and structure programs around more traditional business goals. The study also connects to broader work on sustainability reporting in corporations, such as Charles H. Cho's analysis of organisational façades. These façades—rational, progressive, and reputation-based—allow companies to appeal to different audiences without making major changes. The same logic applies to business schools. They use progressive language, promote innovation, and project responsibility without embedding these values in their core practices. Despite good intentions business schools often fall into patterns of intentional hypocrisy. Talk alone is not enough.

Organisational facades

Corporate sustainability has become a key theme in recent decades, but the distance between what companies say and what they do remains wide. Despite growing pressure from the public and regulators, many firms continue to issue sustainability reports that offer little more than polished language and good intentions. In 'Organised hypocrisy, organisational facades, and sustainability reporting[74]' Charles H. Cho addresses this gap by examining how companies manage the tension between conflicting demands through what is known as 'organised hypocrisy' and the creation of 'organisational façades'. Instead of viewing sustainability reporting simply as a matter of honest or dishonest communication, Cho argues that companies are responding to deeply rooted institutional pressures. On one side, stakeholders demand transparency and environmental action. On the other, business realities often require firms to prioritise profit and competitiveness. This contradiction forces companies into a kind of performance. They talk about sustainability, set targets, and publish glossy reports. But behind the scenes, little changes. These performances are façades that allow them to appear responsible while continuing with business as usual. Cho draws on the work of Nils Brunsson, who developed the concept of organised hypocrisy to describe how organisations deal with incompatible pressures. They say one thing, decide another, and do something else entirely. The point is not to deceive in a simple sense but to survive in a complex and often contradictory environment. These hypocrisies are not mistakes. They are strategies. Similarly, the idea of organisational façades describes how companies build visible structures—like codes of ethics or sustainability offices—not to transform their behaviour, but to manage how others perceive them. To ground these ideas, Cho examines two large U.S. oil companies during a period of public debate over drilling in the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge. These firms released sustainability reports filled with claims about environmental stewardship yet continued to pursue extractive policies. The façade was maintained through language, branding, and selective disclosures. The reports served not as tools of transformation but as shields, allowing the companies to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the public while continuing to operate in environmentally harmful ways. This analysis raises serious questions about the usefulness of sustainability reporting. If such reports are shaped more by the need to manage appearances than by the desire to foster real change, then they risk becoming part of the problem. They may

[74] Cho, C.H. (2021) 'Organized hypocrisy, organizational façades and sustainability reporting', Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal, 34(7), pp. 1574–1597.

lull the public into a false sense of security or allow corporations to delay meaningful reform. The conclusion is not that all sustainability reporting is useless. Rather, Cho calls for a more critical understanding of what these reports do. By recognising the pressures that drive organised hypocrisy and facades, one can better assess when sustainability claims reflect real action and when they serve to mask business-as-usual practices.

The necessity of pretence

In 'Machiavelli, Rousseau, and the Ethics of Politics[75]' (1997), Ruth Grant examines how both thinkers grapple with the moral contradictions of political life, revealing the tension between ethical ideals and the pragmatic demands of power. In liberal political systems, decisions are supposed to be made through reasoned argument and public justification. Ideally, politicians and citizens appeal to shared principles and offer rational explanations for their views. But in practice, many political positions are shaped by self-interest, emotions, or loyalty rather than pure reason. Because admitting these motivations would damage credibility, politicians often present carefully crafted justifications instead. The result is a kind of necessary political pretence. Liberal politics depends on a shared commitment to reasoned deliberation. Yet this very commitment often encourages a subtle form of hypocrisy. Political actors feel compelled to mask their private motivations and speak in the language of public virtue. This is not always deceitful in the malicious sense. Often, it is a form of restraint. It forces people to think through their arguments and frame them in ways that appeal to shared norms. As Ruth Grant notes, this creates a productive tension between ideals and behaviour in liberal democracy, where rhetorical sincerity and political effectiveness rarely align perfectly. Theorists like Machiavelli and Rousseau understood this tension. Machiavelli argued that rulers must sometimes deceive to maintain stability, while Rousseau acknowledged the role of appearances in sustaining public morality. Both saw that politics requires a degree of acting—a performance that allows people to coexist despite conflicting interests. Unlike Adam Smith, who thought transparent appeals to self-interest could replace hypocrisy, they recognised that political life would collapse without some shared illusions. This hypocrisy, while often criticised, can strengthen political discourse. When citizens are expected to offer rational justifications, they are encouraged to engage with others respectfully. The pretence of objectivity helps prevent raw power struggles and keeps the focus on persuasion. Even when arguments are shaped by self-interest, the requirement to express them through public reason helps maintain the appearance—and often the reality—of fairness. There is also a deeper moral dimension to this dynamic. By asking people to defend their views as if they were grounded in shared principles, liberal politics gives moral standards a public role. This is true even when participants fall short of these standards. The demand for justification disciplines political behaviour. It encourages moderation, self-awareness, and the possibility of change. Critics of bourgeois hypocrisy often point out how this kind of moral posturing can become hollow or even complicit in injustice. They are right to warn against complacency. But rejecting all forms of hypocrisy risks swinging too far in the other direction—toward a cynical politics that ignores virtue entirely. When no one even pretends to care about public principles, the result is not honesty but erosion of the norms that hold democratic life together. Hypocrisy in politics is not simply a weakness. It is a structural feature of systems that rely on mutual respect, deliberation, and persuasion. While it can become corrupt, it also creates space for ethics to matter—even in imperfect forms.

[75] Grant, R. (1997) Machiavelli, Rousseau, and the Ethics of Politics. University of Chicago Press.

3.3. Paradox of hypocricy

(Living between masks: False selves and moral survival)

'It is easier to fight for one's principles than to live up to them'.

— Alfred Adler, Understanding Human Nature

'A man is not what he thinks he is, he is what he hides'.

— André Malraux, Anti-Memoirs

Paradox of hypocrisy

In 'Moral Hypocrisy: Social Psychology and the Study of Virtue[76]'(2008), C. Daniel Batson explores the paradox at the heart of human morality: people want to appear virtuous without necessarily acting virtuously. Drawing on empirical research in social psychology, Batson reveals how individuals often engage in moral hypocrisy—professing ethical principles while violating them when self-interest is at stake—suggesting that the desire to be seen as good can override the desire to do good. Moral hypocrisy is not just a moral failing. It reflects a deeper psychological division. For example, John does not see himself as dishonest or harmful. Instead, he constructs a narrative in which he remains the rational, responsible one, misunderstood by others. What allows him to maintain this illusion is what Freud called disavowal—a way of holding two conflicting beliefs at once, while keeping them apart. John can act immorally without feeling like a bad person, because he refuses to fully confront the contradiction. This process differs from repression. Repression pushes unacceptable thoughts out of awareness. Disavowal, on the other hand, acknowledges them but holds them at a distance. John knows he lied, but insists it was for a good reason. He accepts the fact but denies its meaning. This helps him avoid internal conflict, but at the cost of genuine accountability. Moral hypocrisy is the effort to appear moral without bearing the costs of moral behaviour. It allows someone like John to maintain the appearance of virtue while acting in ways that contradict it. The concern is less about doing right and more about being seen as someone who does. In this light, hypocrisy is a form of self-deception that prioritises image over substance. The connection between hypocrisy and perversion is striking. Both involve a kind of double life, where socially accepted values coexist with secret violations. Arlow's concept of character perversion explains how individuals twist reality to suit their desires, dismissing inconvenient truths through rationalisation. Hypocrisy uses the same mechanism. It is a way of shaping the moral landscape so that one's actions seem justified, even when they clearly are not. John's case shows how hypocrisy functions not only as a mask for others, but as a psychological defence for the self. It protects him from discomfort, shame, and the collapse of his self-image. His sincerity, when it appears, is fleeting and self-serving. He believes just enough to preserve the illusion. Hypocrisy is less about deception than about survival. It is an attempt to live with contradiction without being undone by it. Yet the cost is high. Relationships built on falsehood, moral growth deferred, and a fractured sense of self. Recognising hypocrisy as a psychological strategy helps explain its persistence, but also its limits.

[76] Batson, C. D. (2008) Moral Hypocrisy: Social Psychology and the Study of Virtue, University of Notre Dame Press.

Hypocrisy and moral authority

In her study 'Hypocrisy and Moral Authority[77]' on moral life, Jessica Isserow explores how hypocrisy weakens the very authority it pretends to uphold. Hypocrisy is more than inconsistency. It points to a deeper problem—an erosion of credibility in those who claim to speak with moral weight. Politicians, priests, teachers, or even friends who ask others to live by standards they ignore themselves become suspect. When words and actions clash in this way, people lose trust. The hypocrite is not just flawed but seen as dangerous to shared moral life. To understand the charge of hypocrisy, Isserow focuses on the idea of moral authority. Some people are recognised, whether formally or informally, as guides in matters of right and wrong. Their words carry weight. These are not simply individuals with ethical knowledge but people whose judgments shape others' actions. They may lead by example, influence group norms, or impose moral expectations. In this role, their integrity becomes central. Hypocrisy, when discovered, shakes that foundation. A moral guide who fails to follow their own rules risks becoming a figure of ridicule or resentment. This is particularly visible in public life. When a politician enforces strict rules but privately breaks them, or when a celebrity promotes a cause while ignoring its principles, the backlash is often swift. It is not just the contradiction that offends—it is the betrayal of a trust. Moral authority is not a neutral position. It is built on the belief that the speaker embodies the values they promote. If that belief crumbles, so does the authority. Isserow argues that even those who reject a person's values can still rightly judge them hypocritical. A secular critic may not accept a religious leader's doctrine, but they can still call out the leader's failure to live by their professed beliefs. This gives hypocrisy a unique role in cross-cultural or pluralistic societies. Even amid disagreement, people can unite in rejecting dishonesty. Hypocrisy becomes a point of contact between opposing views. It draws attention to gaps between ideals and behaviour, forcing conversations about consistency, accountability, and fairness. More than moral failure, hypocrisy is a kind of social betrayal. It affects institutions as well as individuals. When governments or organisations hold themselves up as moral examples while acting in ways that contradict their statements, public trust erodes. Calling out hypocrisy becomes a way to regulate moral authority, not destroy it. It demands coherence, not perfection.

Harming by deceit

In their study 'Harming by Deceit: Epistemic Malevolence and Organisational Wrongdoing[78]', Marco Meyer and Chun Wei Choo examine how some corporations systematically deceive the public in ways that cause serious harm. This kind of deception, which they call 'epistemic malevolence', is not simply about hiding mistakes. It involves a deliberate strategy to mislead others, often by controlling or manipulating information. The authors analysed eighty high-penalty misconduct cases in the United States from 2000 to 2020 and found that this behaviour is not rare. In fact, it was present in most of the cases studied. Two main strategies of deception emerged. One is 'sowing doubt', where an organisation spreads uncertainty to confuse or delay scrutiny. The other is 'exploiting trust', which involves the active manipulation of knowledge—concealing, distorting, or falsifying facts that others depend on. While sowing doubt has received more attention in past research, Meyer and Choo found that exploiting trust is more common. This has major consequences for regulation. Efforts to counter

[77] Isserow, J. and Klein, C. (2017) 'Hypocrisy and Moral Authority', School of Philosophy, Australian National University and Macquarie University.
[78] Meyer, M. and Choo, C.W. (2023) 'Harming by Deceit: Epistemic Malevolence and Organizational Wrongdoing', Journal of Business Ethics, 190(2), pp. 257–275.

misinformation often rely on promoting independent research and debate, but those tools are less effective when organisations are hiding information outright. Epistemic malevolence is not a single act. It is a persistent trait embedded in corporate culture. Organisations with this vice do not just occasionally mislead. They operate on deception as a routine part of their structure. The researchers connect this behaviour to deeper institutional patterns, suggesting that some organisations develop a long-term disposition to mislead to maintain power, avoid accountability, or protect profits. This type of wrongdoing is often invisible to outsiders until significant harm has already occurred. The study also distinguishes epistemic malevolence from other kinds of organisational dishonesty. Some lies may be told to protect others or cover up past harm. But epistemic malevolence is different. It is forward-looking and strategic. It aims to influence decisions by controlling knowledge—convincing people to buy, invest, or act against their own interests based on false or missing information. Examples include car companies cheating emissions tests or drug companies downplaying side effects. The authors introduce a model that explains how epistemic malevolence leads to harm. It begins with a corrupted information environment—either contested, where knowledge is debated, or controlled, where one party dominates access. In the latter case, organisations are more likely to exploit trust. This finding calls for a shift in how regulators think about oversight. Promoting transparency and enforcing disclosure become more urgent when organisations manage the flow of knowledge itself. The study also points to future research needs. The authors caution that their data may reflect reporting biases, since high-penalty cases attract more attention. They also acknowledge that more work is needed to understand how to change these harmful cultures. But the warning is clear: some organisations are not just misinformed or negligent. They are structured to deceive.

Role playing and opinion change

In their study 'The Influence of Role Playing on Opinion Change[79]', Irving L. Janis and Bert T. King examine the effects of role-playing on belief systems. They begin with the observation that individuals often adopt views they do not initially hold when placed in specific social roles. This tendency is seen across education, therapy, leadership training, and counselling. But does publicly arguing for a belief, even one not genuinely held, cause people to adopt it privately? To answer this question, Janis and King designed an experiment involving college students. Participants were split into two groups: one group was instructed to actively present arguments supporting a given viewpoint, while the other group simply listened to the same arguments. The messages concerned plausible but hypothetical future events and were designed to be persuasive without being extreme. All participants were exposed to the same material, ensuring that the only difference was the active or passive nature of their engagement. The results were clear. In two out of three cases, those who played an active role in presenting the arguments showed significantly more change in opinion than those who passively listened. Even when the shift in viewpoint was small, those who had participated in role-playing reported more confidence in their new beliefs. This suggests that the act of speaking in favour of a position can itself lead to deeper acceptance—a finding that supports the idea that saying can lead to believing. The researchers identified two important conditions that strengthened this effect. First, participants who improvised or elaborated on the arguments, rather than simply reciting a script, showed more change in attitude. This indicates that actively constructing a message lead to a stronger internalisation of its content. Second, those who felt they performed

[79] Janis, I. L. and King, B. T. (1954) The Influence of Role Playing on Opinion Change. The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 49(2).

well in their role-playing were more likely to report a shift in opinion. A sense of success or fluency in presenting the viewpoint seemed to validate the opinion for the speaker. The implications of this research are far-reaching. It highlights how public behaviour can influence private beliefs, not just the other way around. People often think of opinion change as a rational process of weighing information. But Janis and King show that the simple act of arguing for a point—even as a role—can reshape internal attitudes. This raises questions about the stability of beliefs and the ease with which social environments can alter them. Their findings also suggest practical applications. Role-playing could be used not only to rehearse arguments or practice communication but as a method for genuine opinion transformation. It may prove especially useful in contexts where shifting beliefs is essential—such as conflict resolution, education, or political engagement. In some cases, the act of role-playing can outweigh the words themselves, as embodying a position can reshape beliefs more powerfully than language alone. By living a role, people may internalise its perspective, turning performance into conviction.

Games as social worlds

In 'Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds[80]', Gary Alan Fine explores how fantasy gaming functions as a microcosm of social life. Although the world of tabletop role-playing games is small and culturally peripheral, it offers a useful lens for understanding how individuals build meaning and identity within voluntary social groups. Fine approaches the subject through the lens of symbolic interactionism, focusing on everyday interactions to grasp how players create and sustain shared realities. His study combines participant observation with interviews, allowing him to examine fantasy gaming not just as entertainment but as a structured social practice shaped by rules, roles, and relationships. Fantasy gaming takes place within what Fine calls an 'urban leisure subculture'. These are voluntary spaces where people seek enjoyment, companionship, and identity through shared activity. In fantasy games, participants build detailed fictional worlds governed by agreed-upon rules. Players inhabit invented characters and develop narratives with the help of a referee or game master. This collective storytelling results in an improvised but structured culture that evolves over time. While it might seem like pure imagination, these worlds are tightly bound by expectations and conventions that guide behaviour and reinforce social norms within the group. A key concept in Fine's study is 'engrossment', the process through which players become absorbed in the game. This involves bracketing real-world identities to step into the fictional world. Players may act as versions of themselves or fully inhabit their character's persona. These choices affect how they relate to the game and to one another. Emotional investment is common, and players often form deep attachments to their characters. This emotional identification adds depth to the experience, making the game more than just a pastime. Fantasy gaming also fulfils the criteria of a subculture. It involves recruitment, shared values, and a degree of separation from mainstream society. While like other subcultures like punk or feminism, it lacks overt political goals. Instead, it focuses on creativity and community, offering players a chance to collaborate and explore shared fantasies. Yet, this open space is not without its exclusions. Fine notes that these groups are often male-dominated, and gender dynamics within the games can reflect traditional roles and attitudes. Even in imagined worlds, real-world hierarchies and biases persist. The gaming groups themselves are small, overlapping networks that contribute to a larger culture. Status within the group is shaped by age, knowledge, and skill. These

[80] Fine, G.A. (1983) Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

hierarchies influence decision-making and narrative direction, adding another layer of realism to the social dynamics. Players work together to build not just stories, but a functioning culture with its own norms and values—what Fine calls 'idioculture'. Finally, the concept of 'frame oscillation' helps link gaming to everyday life. Players shift between identities, just as people in daily life shift between roles—worker, friend, parent. Role-playing games become a rehearsal space for managing these transitions, showing how humans constantly navigate layered realities. In societal, ideological, and political role-playing games, “idioculture” can be engineered to immerse participants in self-contained worlds whose norms and values gradually replace critical thought. Over time, players risk carrying these fabricated rules into real life, becoming “idiots” in the original Greek sense—isolated from the common reality.

Hypocrisy and integrity

In 'Machiavelli, Rousseau, and the Ethics of Politics[81]', Ruth Grant explores the tension between hypocrisy and integrity in political life. Hypocrisy is often condemned as a form of moral failure—especially in politics, where it is associated with dishonesty and manipulation. Yet, Grant argues that this view is too narrow. In both public and private life, hypocrisy and integrity exist in a complex relationship. Integrity is often praised as the opposite of hypocrisy, but in the political realm, complete transparency or rigid moral consistency may be unworkable or even harmful. Grant draws a distinction between two forms of ethical failure. On one end is the classic hypocrite—the politician or leader who uses the appearance of virtue for personal or political gain. On the other is the 'antihypocrite', someone so committed to moral purity that they refuse all compromise, even when it leads to greater harm. Grant suggests that both extremes miss the point. In politics, where conflicting interests and public roles create constant moral tension, some level of hypocrisy may be unavoidable. The alternative, Grant proposes, is integrity—not in the sense of unbending idealism, but as the ability to hold onto ethical commitments while recognising the need for compromise. Integrity requires judgment. It means knowing when to stand firm and when to bend. This distinction becomes clearer through her comparison of Machiavelli and Rousseau. Machiavelli, in 'The Prince', treats deception as a necessary part of ruling. For him, political success often depends on appearances. He argues that leaders must know how to lie and pretend when the situation demands it. Rousseau, by contrast, is deeply troubled by this logic. Though he recognises the role of hypocrisy in politics, he warns that it can destroy the moral core of public life if left unchecked. Rousseau values sincerity but also acknowledges that ideal purity is difficult to maintain in practice. Grant shows how Rousseau’s critique of moderation challenges liberal democracies. These systems often pride themselves on honesty and transparency, yet their structures create strong incentives for hypocrisy. Politicians must manage public opinion, build coalitions, and navigate institutional pressures—all of which encourage strategic compromise and the concealment of true motives. In this context, Rousseau’s concern is that liberal societies may deceive themselves into thinking they are more virtuous than they are. At the same time, Rousseau does not call for radical purity. His version of integrity accepts the realities of politics but insists on moral vigilance. He urges political actors to be conscious of the compromises they make and to avoid losing sight of their ethical aims. Hypocrisy, for Rousseau, is not just a failure to practice what one preaches—it is a failure to see that one has abandoned the ideals altogether.

[81] Grant, R. (1997) Machiavelli, Rousseau, and the Ethics of Politics*. University of Chicago Press.

Do as I say (not as I do)

In 'Do As I Say (Not As I Do)[82]', Peter Schweizer examines a troubling pattern among high-profile liberals who preach progressive values while living in contradiction to them. His focus is not simply on the failure to practice what one preaches, but on the systemic way in which public moralising is often used as a political weapon, while personal lives tell a different story. Schweizer opens by acknowledging that hypocrisy is a charge often aimed at conservatives—highlighting scandals like Rush Limbaugh's addiction or Dr. Laura Schlessinger's youthful photos—but he points out that these critics rarely apply the same scrutiny to liberal figures who exhibit similar, or worse, contradictions. Liberal commentators often excuse their inconsistency by claiming their positions are more nuanced or flexible. But as Schweizer argues, many liberals adopt strong, absolutist positions on issues like labour rights, environmentalism, and racial equality. Despite this, their actions frequently reveal a disregard for those very principles. Terry McAuliffe, for example, was an advocate for organised labour but failed to use union workers in his private business. Likewise, advocates of affirmative action in Congress did not apply those standards in their own hiring practices, employing minorities at rates no better than their conservative counterparts. The contradictions become even starker in Schweizer's profile of Noam Chomsky. Long revered as a radical critic of capitalism, militarism, and American foreign policy, Chomsky's public identity rests on moral opposition to these structures. Yet his personal finances and professional history tell a different story. Much of his early linguistic research was funded by the Pentagon, and he continues to benefit from royalties, property holdings, and tax strategies common among the wealthy. He denounces corporate America but holds investments in companies tied to industries he publicly opposes. His willingness to accept funding and protections from the very system he condemns raises serious questions about the sincerity of his political stance. Schweizer also notes how Chomsky, a fierce defender of free speech, has stayed silent or even expressed admiration for regimes like Cuba or Vietnam, where dissent is suppressed. This inconsistency, according to Schweizer, is not accidental. It reflects a deeper trend among liberal elites who use radical rhetoric to build their personal brand while avoiding the real costs of living by their ideals. The broader point is not to claim that conservatives are morally superior, but to expose a specific type of liberal hypocrisy: one that gains social, political, and even financial capital through public moralising while privately benefitting from the very systems it condemns. This hypocrisy is not just personal—it shapes public discourse, misleads young people, and distorts policy debates. The call to action is simple: political speech should not be immune to scrutiny. Those who demand change should be held to the same standards they set for others.

EdSpeak and Doubletalk

In 'EdSpeak and Doubletalk[83]', Diane Ravitch and Nancy E. Bailey confront the growing misuse of language in the world of public education. Education, like many professions, has its own specialised vocabulary. But unlike law or medicine, the terms used in schooling affect every citizen. Still, most people are left out of the conversation due to the jargon-heavy and often misleading language used in policy discussions. The original EdSpeak, written in 2006, was meant to help readers decode this language. Over time, however, the terms have multiplied and shifted, often more influenced by marketing than by educational substance. Since the

[82] Schweizer, P. (2005) Do As I Say (Not As I Do): Profiles in Liberal Hypocrisy*. New York: Doubleday.
[83] Ravitch, D. and Bailey, N.E. (2020) EdSpeak and Doubletalk: A Glossary to Decipher Hypocrisy and Save Public Schooling. New York: Teachers College Press.

passage of the No Child Left Behind Act under George W. Bush, education policy has become increasingly centralised and politicised. That law introduced federal mandates that tied school performance to standardised testing. The Obama administration followed with Race to the Top, which doubled down on testing and promoted charter schools. Under Trump, the push for school choice and privatisation intensified. Throughout this process, politicians and reformers cloaked controversial policies in vague or appealing language that hid their real effects. Terms like 'accountability', 'standards', and 'choice' sound neutral or even positive, but they often signal top-down control, budget cuts, or the weakening of public education. 'Students First' is a phrase that seems supportive of children but is often used to justify attacks on teachers. 'Personalised learning' might suggest one-on-one attention, but it usually means a child sits alone in front of a screen, following a program designed by a tech company. These examples show how the language of reform can distort public perception and block meaningful debate. What Ravitch and Bailey argue is that this rhetorical manipulation is not accidental. It is part of a deliberate strategy by wealthy donors, private foundations, and political groups to reshape public education according to market principles. These actors frame public schools as 'failing' and propose reforms that open the door to privatisation. The problem, as the authors explain, is not with the teachers or the system itself, but with poverty, inequality, and underinvestment. Yet those issues are rarely addressed directly. Instead, the language focuses blame on schools and teachers, setting the stage for interventions that rarely help and often harm. The book also critiques how the media reinforces this language. Reforms are often covered with glowing headlines and little scepticism. Meanwhile, the actual impact on communities, especially low-income and marginalised ones, is ignored. The shift from local to federal control, and from public oversight to private influence, has been masked by a steady stream of doubletalk. 'EdSpeak and Doubletalk' is not just a glossary. It is a political and social warning. But calls for honesty and transparency in educational language have long since been drowned out by an ever more politicised and agenda-driven discourse, where jargon serves power rather than truth. Trapped in this EdSpeak labyrinth, there is no clear way out—only endless rewording that conceals the same agendas..

Impact of hypocrisy on opinion

In group settings, individuals often find themselves caught between what they believe privately and what they express publicly. This dissonance—commonly referred to as hypocrisy—can subtly shape how opinions spread through a group. In 'The impact of hypocrisy on opinion formation [84]' Michael T. Gastner and his collaborators present a mathematical model that explores how these internal and external layers of opinion interact and affect the path to group consensus. The model they use is called the Concealed Voter Model (CVM). It allows for the presence of 'hypocrites', or individuals whose public expressions do not match their private beliefs. What the researchers find is that hypocrisy slows down consensus without entirely preventing it. The process unfolds in two distinct phases. First, a fast alignment where the number of hypocrites stabilises. Then, a much slower drift as the group gradually settles on a common opinion. Despite its delaying effect, the level of hypocrisy in the group does not significantly change how long it takes to reach consensus. What matters more is the original balance of opinions. This distinction challenges some assumptions about how opinion dynamics work. It suggests that the simple presence of hidden views does not carry as much weight in determining outcomes as the initial distribution of those views. Hypocrisy acts more like

[84] Gastner, M.T. et al. (2019) .The impact of hypocrisy on opinion formation: A dynamic model. PLOS ONE, 14(6), p.e0218729. doi:https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0218729.

background noise than a decisive force. Still, the effects are not trivial. Because individuals may feel pressure to hide their true beliefs, it becomes harder to measure what a group thinks. This is particularly relevant in political polling, courtroom deliberations, and public debates, where voiced opinions may not fully reflect deeper convictions. A key insight of the study is that hypocrisy emerges from the clash between social norms and personal beliefs. When institutions reward conformity, people may suppress disagreement and appear aligned with majority views. This pressure fuels internalisation, where people adopt the public stance over time. On the other hand, when self-expression is encouraged, people are more likely to share their honest views. In such cases, the group's movement toward consensus slows down even further, preserving diversity of opinion. The study also notes that group size and structure matter. In larger populations, consensus takes longer simply because there are more opinions to process. Additionally, the network through which individuals interact can amplify or dampen the effects of hypocrisy. These complexities suggest that real-world opinion formation may follow slower, less predictable paths than surface-level data reveals. In conclusion, Gastner's model reveals that hypocrisy, while delaying group consensus, does not fundamentally alter its direction. What matters most is the starting balance of opinions. However, because hypocrisy clouds the visibility of those opinions, it poses challenges for those trying to gauge public sentiment. Encouraging honest expression may slow the process, but it ensures that consensus, when reached, is more reflective of genuine belief.

Why do we hate hypocrites?

Hypocrisy provokes a stronger emotional reaction than simple dishonesty. People often dislike hypocrites more than liars. But why is this the case? According to Jillian J. Jordan in 'Why Do We Hate Hypocrites? Evidence for a Theory of False Signalling[85]', the key lies not in the immorality of the hypocrite's actions but in the way, hypocrisy misleads others. Specifically, it sends a false signal—a public condemnation of bad behaviour—that implies the speaker behaves better than they do. This false signal distorts how people perceive the hypocrite. By condemning a behaviour, the person implies they do not engage in it themselves. This is a powerful signal, stronger even than making a direct claim about one's own morality. Across a series of studies, Jordan shows that when people issue moral judgments, observers assume those individuals act morally in the future. That trust is undermined when the moraliser turns out to be guilty of the same behaviour. In the first two studies, participants saw moral condemnation as a more reliable indicator of someone's character than self-praise. Simply put, people believe actions speak louder than words—and moral condemnation is a kind of action. In a third study, participants were asked to judge different kinds of moral offenders. Hypocrites were viewed more harshly than outright liars and those who committed the same acts without condemning others. The reason? Hypocrites not only break the rules but do so while pretending to uphold them. One might think that honesty could redeem the hypocrite. In a fourth study, Jordan examined whether admitting to wrongdoing changes how people judge hypocrisy. It turns out that 'honest hypocrites'—those who admit they have done what they condemn—are seen much more positively. They no longer send a false signal. Their condemnation is no longer misleading because they openly acknowledge their fault. This confirms that the real problem is not bad behaviour but the illusion of moral superiority. However, Study 5 complicates this. Hypocrites who confess to unrelated bad behaviour—say, lying in one context while condemning stealing in another—are still judged negatively. That is because their condemnation still falsely signals,

[85] Jordan, J. J. (2017) 'Why Do We Hate Hypocrites? Evidence for a Theory of False Signaling', Psychological Science, 28(3), pp. 356–368.

they avoid the specific behaviour they attack. The signal remains deceptive even if some other truth is admitted. Jordan's findings challenge the idea that people dislike hypocrisy purely because it involves inconsistency. Instead, hypocrisy is more about manipulation—specifically, manipulating others' perceptions of moral character. The condemnation is not wrong. What matters is that it misleads.

Specter of hypocrisy

Hypocrisy haunts public life. It is not just a personal flaw, but a deep moral concern embedded in political speech and social judgment. When someone is called a hypocrite, the accusation strikes at their integrity. It implies not only inconsistency but a betrayal of shared norms. As Raphael Sassower explains in 'Testing the Limits of Moral Discourse[86]', this charge carries weight because it appeals to common values—truthfulness, fairness, and authenticity. In politics, where contradiction often goes unchecked, calling out hypocrisy can still force accountability. It pushes both individuals and institutions to reflect on the principles they claim to uphold. The term hypocrisy stems from Greek and Hebrew roots that suggest performance and concealment. In Greek, it referred to acting behind a mask. In Hebrew, it hints at blending in, like a chameleon. This dual heritage shows that hypocrisy can be both a deliberate cover and a subtle adaptation. Sassower uses this insight to explore how moral discourse operates in contemporary America. Hypocrisy is not just about saying one thing and doing another. It is also about hiding behind language that claims virtue while protecting vice. This tension became stark during the COVID-19 pandemic. The U.S. government spoke of liberty and resilience, but its actions often betrayed marginalised communities. The rhetoric of freedom was used to justify neglect. Essential workers, many of them undocumented, were praised while being exposed to harm. The pandemic revealed how moral language can be used to obscure injustice. Hypocrisy here was not only individual but structural woven into the very fabric of policy and public relations. Sassower connects this with the deeper history of American contradiction. A nation founded on liberty also depended on slavery. Democratic ideals coexisted with violent exclusions. Today, similar contradictions persist. Political leaders invoke fairness while enacting policies that deepen inequality. In this context, the charge of hypocrisy becomes a form of critique. It highlights the gap between what is said and what is done. But it also risks being reduced to a rhetorical weapon, losing its moral force if overused or ignored. Sassower's book traces this tension across philosophy, politics, psychology, and religion. In philosophy, he notes, hypocrisy challenges the binary of truth and lies. It exists in the grey space of performance and rationalisation. Politically, it reflects the calculated use of moral language for strategic ends. Psychologically, it points to the fragmented self, pulled between ideals and reality. Religiously, hypocrisy is condemned as a failure of faith and sincerity. Across these fields, the pattern remains: hypocrisy disrupts trust and corrodes meaning. In the end, Sassower suggests that calling out hypocrisy is more than a moral gesture. It is a way of defending shared values in the face of deception. The spectre of hypocrisy will not vanish, but its power lies in reminding society of its better self. To name hypocrisy is to insist that actions should match principles, and that moral speech must not be reduced to performance.

Perspectival truths

In 'Perspectival Realism [87]' Michela Massimi offers a way to understand truth that avoids both rigid realism and total relativism. Her idea of 'truth within a perspective' helps make sense

[86] Sassower, R. (2021) Testing the Limits of Moral Discourse, London: Routledge.
[87] Massimi, M. (2022) Perspectival Realism, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

of how science can speak about reality even when its claims change over time. Drawing on Nietzsche's notion that truth is never neutral but always shaped by context, Massimi also insists that reality itself is not up for grabs. There is a world outside our perspectives, but how we access it depends on where we are looking from. She challenges the belief in a neutral 'view from nowhere', arguing that scientific claims are always made from within specific contexts. These include not only the theories and instruments used, but also the historical moment in which scientists work. Still, this does not mean truth is just a social construct. Nature, according to Massimi, does not change because our theories do. Our views of it shift, but the thing observed remains. To make this more precise, Massimi introduces the idea of 'perspective-sensitivity'. This means that every scientific theory or model defines its own conditions for what counts as true. But these conditions are not arbitrary. They are shaped by real constraints—empirical data, conceptual coherence, and predictive success. Science is not about creating fantasies; it is about building models that work within a world that resists falsehoods. She compares this to map-making: every map is partial, but still useful. No one expects a perfect map of the whole world, but good maps help us navigate real terrain. Scientific knowledge, in her view, is made up of these partial yet successful representations of reality. While no single perspective captures everything, the accumulation and comparison of different perspectives bring us closer to a richer understanding of the world. This idea also draws on Karl Popper's view of science as a process of critical comparison among competing theories, each shaped by its own context. In today's world, where truth is often politicised or dismissed, Massimi's approach offers an important middle ground. Her perspectival realism recognises that truth claims are context-bound but not meaningless. They can still be assessed, criticised, and improved. This is vital in the so-called post-truth era, where the idea of truth itself is often undermined. Instead of choosing between blind faith in objectivity or a cynical embrace of relativism, she asks us to engage with truth as an evolving, collaborative effort. In conclusion, Massimi's perspectival truth bridges the gap between context and objectivity. It accepts that knowledge is situated yet insists that nature does not bend to every belief. Scientific inquiry becomes a practice of tracing stable patterns through changing perspectives. In an age where facts are contested and certainty is rare; this model invites a more responsible and careful way to think about truth.

Necessary hypocrisy

What keeps organisations alive is often not what textbooks suggest. Efficiency, clear hierarchy, and consistency are commonly cited as vital traits for success. But real-world organisations show something else. They survive and thrive not by strictly following these ideals but by adjusting to competing and often conflicting demands. In 'The Organisation of Hypocrisy[88]' Nils Brunsson calls this adjustment 'necessary hypocrisy'. Organisations must appeal to outside observers—governments, investors, the public—to gain legitimacy and support. To do this, they often adopt structures and routines that appear rational and progressive. They speak the language of social responsibility, transparency, or innovation. But many of these practices serve more as symbolic gestures than functional tools. Activities like staff consultations or strategic planning sessions often have little to do with real decision-making. They are rituals, carried out to present an image of order and compliance. Brunsson argues that a gap develops between what organisations say and what they do. This split between formal representation and actual behaviour is not accidental. It is built into how organisations function.

[88] Brunsson, N. (2002) The Organization of Hypocrisy: Talk, Decisions and Actions in Organizations, Copenhagen Business School Press.

Formal structures exist to satisfy external expectations, while informal routines take care of internal coordination and practical needs. By separating these two levels, organisations create the flexibility to oversee competing demands. For instance, one part of an organisation might appear centralised to impress regulators, while another operates in a decentralised way to respond quickly to customer needs. This disconnection, or hypocrisy, allows organisations to respond to inconsistent norms. Modern societies demand both equality and leadership, both innovation and stability. No single action or value can satisfy all of these at once. To cope, organisations may offer one set of messages in their public statements, follow a different set when making decisions, and act on yet another when implementing change. This strategy may look dishonest, but it is often the only way to balance survival with legitimacy. Brunsson emphasises that this is not a failure of ethics or leadership. It is a rational response to a complex world. The word 'hypocrisy' usually carries a moral judgment. But in this context, it is a structural necessity. Organisations must navigate a web of expectations that cannot all be satisfied at the same time. Hypocrisy becomes a method of survival rather than a moral failing. In conclusion, the success of organisations often depends on their ability to act in contradictory ways. Hypocrisy allows them to appear consistent with societal norms while adapting internally to the realities of business. This necessary gap between appearance and action is not a flaw in modern institutions—it is one of their most effective tools for managing complexity and change.

4. DECEPTION

4.1. Art of deception

(Crafted illusions: The aesthetics and ethics of disinformation)

'Self-deception is not merely a trait of the coward; it is a condition of survival'.

Ernest Becker, The Denial of Death

'The essence of lying is in deception, not in words'.

— John Ruskin, The Crown of Wild Olive

The word made war

In times of war, the battlefield is only the visible surface of a much deeper conflict—one fought in language, memory, and belief. Long before the first soldier is deployed, the machinery of war begins to turn through carefully crafted narratives and strategic deceit. The adage that 'truth is the first casualty of war' captures this enduring reality: no war can begin without propaganda, and no army marches without a story. Modern conflicts, especially in democratic societies, must be justified not only militarily but morally. Citizens must be convinced, not coerced, and that persuasion begins with mythmaking. The use of deception in war is not accidental—it is essential. From ancient stratagems to modern psy-ops, lies and misdirection have always been tactical tools. As the saying goes, men lie most when they are hunting or at war, because both require concealing one’s true intentions. Military language reflects this: 'the fog of war' evokes not just confusion but the intentional clouding of facts. 'The ruse of war' is not an exception but a legitimised form of deception. In war, lying is not a moral failure—it is doctrine. But beyond the battlefield, the most insidious lies are those told at home. A war cannot be sustained without public support, and no mother willingly sends her son to die without believing he is protecting something sacred. That is why war is always framed as defence, never

aggression. Governments rarely admit to economic motives, strategic interests, or geopolitical games; instead, they invoke freedom, justice, and national survival. These are the noble lies—words with symbolic weight that reframe complex conflicts into clear moral binaries. This process is not about clarity but about control: control over how war is understood, remembered, and morally judged. This is why war is always accompanied by media campaigns, speeches, and images—language becomes the weapon that softens resistance and manufactures consent. Each side tells a version of the story where it is the victim or the liberator, never the aggressor. These narratives often outlive the war itself, becoming part of national identity and historical memory. The power of propaganda lies not in its loudness but in its repetition. Say something long enough, across enough channels, and it becomes not a message but a reflex. Just as Pavlov conditioned dogs to salivate at the sound of a bell, propaganda conditions populations to respond to words and images with automatic emotional reactions. Terms like 'terrorist', 'hero', 'freedom', or even specific names—Rodney King, George Floyd, Greta Thunberg—come pre-loaded with meaning, emotion, and allegiance. The manipulation of language does not just distort reality—it reshapes perception until people no longer question what they are told. They repeat slogans, adopt talking points, and share content that aligns with pre-constructed narratives. In this sense, modern warfare is not just kinetic—it is cognitive. The real power lies not in bombs but in the ability to control discourse. Whoever defines the terms defines the war. And in the end, the most powerful weapon is not the gun, but the story that makes its use seem necessary. From slogan to slaughter, the tongue draws blood long before the sword.

Military deception

Military deception is the deliberate act of misleading an adversary to gain a strategic or tactical advantage. Rather than simply hiding the truth, it involves actively presenting false information to influence enemy behaviour. While operations security focuses on concealing real capabilities and plans, deception shapes what the enemy thinks those capabilities and plans are. It creates an artificial 'fog of war', often using psychological tactics, visual illusions, fake signals, and carefully crafted misinformation. Deception can either confuse or mislead. One method increases ambiguity by overwhelming the enemy with too many possibilities. Another narrows their focus, making them confident in a specific—but wrong—interpretation. Both techniques were used in Operation Bodyguard during World War II. First, the Allies hinted at multiple invasion points, then zeroed in on Pas-de-Calais, misleading German forces and facilitating the Normandy landings. Several key tactics have defined successful deception. Feints involve physical attacks meant to distract. Demonstrations show force without engaging. Ruses involve planting false information, as in Operation Mincemeat, where a corpse carrying fake invasion plans diverted German defences. Static displays, such as inflatable tanks or dummy camps, also play a role. These tactics work best when they support an already plausible story or reinforce the enemy’s expectations—a rule known as Magruder’s Principle. Legitimate deception has limits. Under international law, especially the Geneva Conventions, deceit that misuses protected signs or promises of good faith—such as faking surrender—is forbidden. Deception must never cross into perfidy. Successful military deception follows a structured planning process. U.S. doctrine frames it around an enemy’s 'see-think-do' cycle. First, define what action the adversary should take. Then identify the belief that would prompt that action. Finally, design false signals to shape that belief. For example, to keep German troops away from Normandy, the Allies made Hitler believe an invasion would strike Calais. They supported this belief with fake radio traffic, dummy units, and double agents. History is filled with examples of military deception. Ancient generals like Thutmose III and Alexander the Great used tricks to gain entry to cities or surprise enemy forces. The Trojan Horse is the most famous

example—an offering hiding Greek soldiers, brought into Troy under false pretences. From Mongol feigned retreats to British dummy tanks in World War II, deception has repeatedly proven its value. Modern conflicts have also featured elaborate deception. In 1991's Gulf War, coalition forces faked a frontal assault while launching a flanking manoeuvre known as the 'Left Hook'. In 2023, Hamas rehearsed openly and used civilian vehicles in a way that lulled Israeli forces into misreading their true intent. Across history, from wooden horses to digital signals, the core strategy remains unchanged: lead the enemy to misjudge reality. In conclusion, military deception is not just about tricks—it is a methodical, strategic process that uses the enemy's assumptions against them. It exploits human psychology, gaps in intelligence, and the natural tendency to trust what seems familiar. When used ethically and skilfully, it becomes a powerful tool in shaping the course of conflict.

Denial and deception

Denial and Deception (D&D) describe a dual strategy of misdirection used in both military and political contexts. The terms gained prominence in the 1980s as part of a Western theoretical framework that formalised how states manipulate what adversaries perceive. The concept draws on older traditions like Soviet 'maskirovka', but offers a clearer distinction between denial—concealing truth—and deception—projecting falsehood. Denial is passive. It includes securing communications, camouflaging military movements, or restricting information to a need-to-know basis. Its aim is to prevent opponents from discovering actual plans. Deception, on the other hand, is active. It involves constructing a false version of reality. This might include planting misleading stories in the media, staging fake troop deployments, or leaking fabricated diplomatic signals. Both denial and deception are most effective when coordinated toward a single objective, reinforcing one another to influence enemy decisions. History offers compelling examples. Before the Pearl Harbor attack, Japan used denial by changing naval call signs and restricting movement data. At the same time, it deployed deception by announcing the sailing of a passenger liner to California, suggesting evacuation rather than war. The success of this combination rested on coherence—any inconsistency might have exposed the plan. Political theorists like John Mearsheimer have explored how these strategies operate in democratic societies. In 'Why Leaders Lie[89]', he argues that deception works better within democracies than between states, because domestic trust can be exploited. Leaders often lie not to foreign rivals, but to their own populations, as seen in the Bush administration's campaign leading to the 2003 Iraq War. Public trust was instrumental in convincing Americans of a threat that did not exist. Abram Shulsky, a specialist in intelligence policy, notes that liberal democracies face institutional limits on deception. Free media, legal checks, and public scrutiny reduce the space for extensive manipulation—except in wartime. By contrast, authoritarian states can apply denial and deception freely, both internally and externally. Terrorist organisations and non-state actors also use D&D tactics, often blending into civilian populations or staging propaganda events to mislead governments and publics alike. The U.S. Department of Defense includes both elements under the broader category of military deception. It distinguishes between passive denial—hiding facts—and active deception—providing false signals. Canadian officer John M. Roach emphasises this distinction: withholding data is denial, feeding wrong data is deception. Western doctrine, while influenced by Soviet practice, integrates legal and ethical boundaries, particularly in avoiding perfidy. Other cultures and traditions have developed their own versions of D&D. Islamic

[89] Mearsheimer, J. (2011) Why Leaders Lie: The Truth About Lying in International Politics. New York: Oxford University Press.

military theory contains terms like kitman and iham, referring to concealment and misdirection. In Chinese thought, deception is elevated to an art form, with strategies designed not only to confuse but to seduce the enemy into self-defeat. Denial and deception form two pillars of strategic secrecy. Denial hides reality; deception fabricates it. When combined skilfully, they shape an adversary's understanding and actions without direct confrontation. In war, diplomacy, and politics, the power to control perception remains one of the most effective—and dangerous—tools of influence. Walter Lippmann noted that the propaganda machinery built during World War I did not end with the fighting. In 'Public Opinion' (1922), drawing on his time in the U.S. Committee on Public Information, he described how wartime methods—reducing issues to moral absolutes, demonising enemies, glorifying allies, and appealing to emotion over fact—were too effective to abandon. After the armistice, governments, businesses, and political movements kept using them. Propaganda became, in his words, "a regular organ of popular government." What had once mobilised nations for war now managed opinion in peace, shaping a manufactured consent that threatened independent judgment.

False flag, agent provocateur, and red herring

False flags, agent provocateurs, and red herrings are distinct but overlapping forms of deception. Each manipulates trust, perception, and context to create false impressions, distract audiences, or incite actions. These tactics are common not only in war and espionage but also in politics, law enforcement, and ideological campaigns. False flag operations present themselves as the work of an opponent to discredit or provoke a reaction. In political campaigning, false flag tactics may include posing as supporters of an opposing candidate, spreading disinformation, or staging events designed to cause backlash. The 'Canuck letter', a forged message meant to damage a candidate's reputation during the 1972 U.S. election, is one example. More recently, online strategies have been used to impersonate rival groups. During the 2018 U.S. midterms, pipe bomb mailings sparked speculation about false flag intent, though the perpetrator was acting from genuine hostility. In Canada's 2025 campaign, Liberal operatives planted 'Stop the Steal' buttons at a Conservative rally, trying to associate their opponents with foreign conspiracy narratives. When the ploy was revealed, the staffers were quietly reassigned. Agent provocateurs operate by inciting unlawful or damaging actions from within a group, typically to undermine it or justify repression. The term comes from 19th-century France and was later applied to tactics used by secret police and intelligence services worldwide. Governments have often used provocateurs to discredit protest movements or labour unions. In Canada, officers disguised as protesters were identified during the 2007 Montebello summit. In the U.S., the FBI's COINTELPRO program infiltrated civil rights and activist groups, using provocateurs to encourage infighting or radicalisation. Entrapment defences arise when the induced act would not have occurred without the provocateur's pressure, raising legal and ethical concerns. Red herrings, unlike the other two, are logical or rhetorical diversions. They shift attention away from the core issue, often using unrelated or superficially relevant information. A red herring might be introduced intentionally, to confuse or delay, or unintentionally, through poor reasoning. In politics, budget arguments may be used to derail debates about social policy. In mystery novels, red herrings mislead both the characters and readers. Sherlock Holmes stories often rely on this device, drawing attention to false clues before revealing the true solution. The phrase itself comes from a story by William Cobbett, who described misleading hounds with a smoked fish—though the tale was more political metaphor than historical fact. All three tactics rely on misdirection. False flags invent opponents' actions. Agent provocateurs engineer misconduct. Red herrings redirect debate. Each undermines transparency and reasoned discourse. Used strategically, they shape public

perception and influence events while hiding true motives. In an age of rapid communication and digital manipulation, these tactics will be used as long as they remain effective, even when recognised—making awareness the only defence until their power fades.

Guide to lies and statistics

In a world saturated with information, it has never been more urgent to understand how to evaluate what is true. In 'A Field Guide to Lies and Statistics: A Neuroscientist on How to Make Sense of a Complex World[90]' Daniel Levitin argues that although access to data has increased, the ability to critically assess it has not. People are surrounded by pseudo-facts, false statistics, and misleading arguments. Some of this misinformation is spread deliberately. Much of it, however, is shared carelessly—by individuals or institutions that fail to verify the accuracy of what they pass on. One of the main tools of deception is statistics. Numbers give the illusion of certainty and authority. But they are only as honest as their sources and interpretations. Levitin reminds readers that statistics can easily mislead. For instance, wild claims—such as marijuana use doubling every year for decades—collapse when examined closely. Small percentages can also be inflated to sound alarming. A slight increase in a rare event may be framed as an epidemic. These manipulations shape how people perceive danger, success, or social change. Visual data can be just as misleading. Charts and graphs often distort reality. A pie chart, for example, must total 100 percent, yet even mainstream media have broadcast visuals that exceed this, confusing rather than informing. Similarly, changing the scale of a bar graph or omitting data can push a narrative without overtly lying. This subtle manipulation influences public opinion in ways that feel natural and convincing. Language plays a powerful role in shaping understanding. Certain words are emotionally charged, and their use can bias interpretation. Welfare policies, public health issues, or crime rates are often discussed in terms that suggest causation where there is only correlation. Misusing or misrepresenting definitions—such as confusing 'mortality rate' with 'survival rate'—can shift how people respond to medical or social information. Recognising these linguistic tricks is key to identifying when one is being nudged rather than informed. Levitin emphasises the importance of recognising credible sources. Not all expertise is equal. A scientist in one field is not necessarily an authority in another. Public figures, celebrities, and even prize-winning intellectuals often speak outside their area of knowledge. Trust must be earned through transparency and evidence, not reputation alone. The internet complicates this further. Domains like .org or .com may appear authoritative, but many are created to mislead. Deceptive sites are used by political campaigns, corporations, or advocacy groups to sway opinion. Even peer-reviewed studies can be flawed due to funding biases or selective reporting. Levitin urges readers to examine not only the claims being made but how they are presented. This includes understanding who benefits from a particular conclusion and whether multiple, independent sources support it. The goal is not to distrust everything, but to develop habits of careful inspection. In conclusion, critical thinking is a survival skill in the information age. Levitin's message is clear: question statistics, examine language, verify sources, and consider the intent behind the message. Believing without reflection leads to error, while thoughtful scepticism helps people see beyond manipulation and make informed choices. In mass media, statistics often become a fast-selling form of deception—condensing complex, incomprehensible data into colourful, simplified graphics that persuade quickly while quietly distorting the truth.

[90] Levitin, D. (2016) A Field Guide to Lies: Critical Thinking in the Information Age. Penguin.

"A well-wrapped statistic is better than Hitler's "big lie" it misleads, yet it cannot be pinned on you."

— Darrell Huff, How to Lie with Statistics (1954)

Evaluating the world

Understanding the world requires more than gathering facts—it requires thinking clearly about how those facts are interpreted. Some say that rational thinking is a way of trying not to fool yourself, because you are the easiest person to fool. This point reflects the broader challenge of modern life: sorting truth from error in a world flooded with information. In 'A Field Guide to Lies', Daniel Levitin echoes this concern, offering tools to help people navigate misleading claims, flawed arguments, and the frequent misuse of numbers and logic. Science has advanced human knowledge through its insistence on evidence, replication, and scepticism. Yet even scientific research is vulnerable to manipulation. Fraud is rare, but it happens—Andrew Wakefield's infamous study claiming a link between the MMR vaccine and autism is a cautionary example. Though debunked, the damage lingers. More often, distortions arise from poor methodology, biased sampling, or cherry-picked results. That is why science does not rely on single studies. It depends on repeated experiments and meta-analyses that evaluate claims across time and context. Scientific reasoning operates through deduction, induction, and abduction. Deduction begins with general rules and leads to specific conclusions. If the premises are true, the conclusion must follow. Induction works the other way—observing patterns and inferring general principles. It is useful, but never certain. Abduction suggests the best possible explanation for incomplete data. This is how people often reason in daily life—trying to make sense of events using the most plausible story available. Despite these methods, humans make predictable thinking errors. One common mistake is finding connections where none exist. Thinking about someone just before they call feels like a coincidence with meaning, but we forget all the other times we thought about someone and nothing happened. Probability misleads us when we focus only on what did happen, ignoring all that did not. Risk is also frequently misunderstood. After the 9/11 attacks, fear of flying pushed people toward car travel, which carries a higher risk of fatality. Emotion can overpower logic. Marketers and politicians exploit this by using statistics without context. A company might say, '90% of solved break-ins involve security cameras', suggesting cameras solve crimes. But the real question—how many crimes remain unsolved even with video—goes unanswered. Visuals make this worse. Graphs with distorted axes, misleading proportions, or missing data can shape opinions with a glance. Pie charts that add up to more than 100% or bar charts that exaggerate differences are not just errors—they are strategies to manipulate. Changing minds is hard. Once someone accepts a belief, it tends to stick. Even when faced with strong counterevidence, people often rationalise or reject it. This belief perseverance is reinforced by confirmation bias—seeking out information that supports existing views and ignoring what contradicts them. In conclusion, evaluating the world calls for more than consuming information. It requires thinking about how knowledge is formed, evaluated, and sometimes twisted. Rational analysis, not passive reception, is what helps people navigate complexity without losing clarity. At the end rational thinking is also the easiest way to fool yourself because you are the easiest person to fool.

Invented knowledge

When people lose the ability to understand their past through reliable history, they often turn to myths. In 'Invented Knowledge: False History, Fake Science and Pseudo-Religions [91]' Ronald H. Fritze argues, this tendency to embrace false stories is not new. In the 19th century, Americans told themselves that a mysterious white race had built the ancient mounds across the Midwest and had been wiped out by Native Americans. This fiction helped justify the displacement and mistreatment of Indigenous peoples. Other tales, like the idea that the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel once lived in North America, gained popularity, and fed national pride. Pseudohistory has not disappeared. On the contrary, it has become more widespread in the age of mass media and the internet. Radio shows, TV series, and websites promote outlandish stories of ancient aliens, lost continents, and secret histories. Films like '10,000 BC' and 'Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull' blur the line between fact and fantasy. Books such as 'The Da Vinci Code' are treated by some as genuine historical accounts, despite their fictional status. The success of such narratives, both culturally and commercially, shows how easily misinformation can become mainstream. This phenomenon can be dangerous. Holocaust denial, for example, has persisted despite overwhelming evidence and legal rulings. The historian David Irving lost a libel case after being exposed by Deborah Lipstadt as a falsifier of history. Yet denial continues, especially where political ideologies fuel it. Pseudohistory has often served racist or nationalist goals. Nazi Germany used myths of Aryan superiority and lost civilisations to promote its ideology. In India, Tamil nationalists have cited the lost land of Lemuria to support their political claims. These distorted accounts are not mere academic curiosities; they shape identity and justify real-world actions. Fritze draws a line between genuine historical revision and pseudohistory. The former is a normal part of scholarly work, where new evidence can change interpretations. Pseudohistory, by contrast, ignores evidence. It relies on selective data, appeals to emotion, and conspiratorial thinking. Its authors often emerge from a fringe culture that circulates discredited theories—Atlantis, aliens, secret bloodlines—without any rigorous standard of proof. One reason for the growth of pseudohistory is the breakdown of authority in the information age. Anyone can publish. Anyone can claim expertise. Some embrace pseudohistory as a kind of secular religion, offering meaning in a confusing world. Theories by authors like Erich von Däniken resemble science fiction more than scholarship, often echoing themes from writers like H. P. Lovecraft. These stories are grand and mysterious, offering hidden truths that the mainstream allegedly suppresses. They attract loyal audiences who dismiss critics as part of the conspiracy. Another tactic of pseudohistorians is to confuse myth with fact. They often revive the ancient idea of euhemerism, which treats myths as distorted memories of real events. Anything that could have happened is treated as likely to have happened. Gavin Menzies, for instance, argued that Chinese fleets visited America long before Columbus, based on questionable sources. These authors do not just interpret facts differently; they question the facts themselves. The genre thrives on spectacle. Lost civilisations, hidden relics, and mysterious symbols make for compelling stories. Its authors often present themselves as lone voices of truth, standing against the academic elite. They publish bestselling books, appear on TV, and gain massive followings. Many are true believers. Others clearly know they are manipulating their audiences. Either way, the result is the same: widespread confusion about what happened in the past. Pseudohistory is not harmless. It misleads people, fuels prejudice and weakens trust in genuine scholarship. It has been used to justify violence, discrimination, and war. It spreads easily in a world where

[91] Fritze, R. H. (2009) Invented Knowledge: False History, Fake Science and Pseudo-Religions. London: Reaktion Books.

misinformation travels faster than ever before. The only real defence is education—learning how to think critically, evaluate sources, and understand what makes history dependable. Without that, people remain vulnerable to falsehoods disguised as truth. Fritze's work is a call to resist these distortions and protect the integrity of historical knowledge in a world increasingly shaped by fantasy and deception.

The problem with science

Science is facing a serious credibility problem. Across fields as varied as psychology, medicine, and economics, researchers are finding that many published studies cannot be replicated. This growing concern is known as the reproducibility crisis. At its core, it challenges the very idea of what reliable science should be. In 'The Reproducibility Crisis and What to Do About It[92]', R. Barker Bausell outlines how we arrived at this moment and what steps might be taken to correct course. Reproducibility means that the same results can be obtained when an experiment is repeated under the same conditions. It is a basic test of whether a study's findings can be trusted. But increasingly, many studies fail that test. Sometimes it is due to weak experimental designs, misuse of statistics, or a simple lack of transparency in how data was collected and analysed. Often, the problem is deeper: a culture that rewards researchers for getting 'interesting' results rather than truthful ones. The pressure to publish, especially in high-impact journals, has created strong incentives for scientists to produce positive results. This is known as publication bias. Studies that find no effect, or that contradict previous findings, are far less likely to be published. As a result, the literature becomes skewed toward success stories—many of which later turn out to be false positives. Bausell notes that this crisis is not caused by bad intentions alone. It is also driven by systemic factors. Researchers chase funding, tenure, and reputation. Journals chase citations. Everyone is caught in a cycle that encourages quantity over quality. The result is a scientific landscape filled with papers that look solid on the surface but do not hold up when evaluated again. The book also revisits the ideas of Donald T. Campbell and Julian C. Stanley, who defined internal and external validity. Internal validity asks whether the results are caused by the tested variables. External validity asks whether those results apply more broadly. While researchers have focused heavily on internal validity—often through statistical tools and randomised trials—external validity has been neglected. Replication is essential to judge whether results are generalizable, and yet it remains rare. Bausell argues that change must come from both cultural and institutional reforms. Researchers need better training in statistics and study design. Journals should commit to publishing well-executed studies regardless of the outcome. Pre-registration of studies, where researchers commit to a plan before data collection, is one promising step. Open data sharing is another. These practices help prevent selective reporting and improve transparency. Most of all, science needs to reclaim its humility. Not every experiment will produce a breakthrough. Negative results are not failures—they are part of the process. The path to better science starts by accepting that truth matters more than novelty, and that reproducibility is not a technical detail but a foundation.

Deception for profit

Daniel S. Greenberg's 'Science, Money, and Politics: Political Triumph and Ethical Erosion[93]' (2001) traces how American science rose to prominence through political support

[92] Bausell, R. B. (2021) The Reproducibility Crisis and What to Do About It. Oxford University Press.
[93] Greenberg, D. S. (2001) Science, Money, and Politics: Political Triumph and Ethical Erosion. University of Chicago Press.

and financial investment, but not without ethical costs. The book spans the post-World War II era to the early 21st century, showing how science, once relatively autonomous and idealised, gradually became enmeshed in political agendas and economic pressures. What began as a system of public funding for public good evolved into a sprawling enterprise that now depends heavily on lobbying, corporate partnerships, and government favour. Greenberg argues that science's expansion has brought prosperity but also created a bureaucracy more concerned with growth than integrity. Scientists, universities, and research institutions now devote significant energy to securing funding, sometimes at the expense of ethical standards. The political rhetoric used to justify funding often inflates the promise of scientific breakthroughs, shaping public expectations and diverting attention from deeper issues of transparency and accountability. As corporate investment in science grows, the boundary between independent research and private interest becomes harder to define. Scientific autonomy—once taken for granted—is now a claim that must be defended. While researchers argue that free inquiry produces better results, Greenberg shows how the structure of modern funding has shifted priorities. Industry's influence over university research and the metrics used to evaluate scientific success increasingly reflect financial rather than intellectual goals. Despite the concerns raised, scientists remain politically cautious. Most stay within their academic circles, reluctant to engage directly with the political process. This self-imposed isolation limits their influence on policy decisions that deeply affect the direction of research. As science grew more powerful, it also became more vulnerable to the same political and market forces that shaped other sectors of public life. Greenberg challenges the myth that science has been neglected or defunded. In fact, funding has remained steady or even increased, especially when scientists successfully lobby by aligning their work with national interests. The fear of budget cuts, while useful as a rallying cry, often masks the real problem: the ethical erosion that comes from courting political and corporate patrons. When funding depends on pleasing external stakeholders, scientific judgment can be compromised. The book concludes by urging a closer look at how political myths and financial dependencies influence science. The system, though successful in many ways, risks prioritising growth over integrity. Ethical questions are too often sidelined in favour of productivity and influence. Science today stands as a powerful institution, one capable of shaping national policy and technological innovation. But that power comes with responsibility.

In 2001 Greenberg calls for more transparency, a broader ethical conversation, and a renewed focus on public interest over profit. But the chances of that happening are slim, given current trends in scientific publishing and the growing body of research exposing 'organized scientific fraud' and misconduct within science itself. In 2005 Reese A. K. Richardson and Luís A. Nunes Amaral are literally 'fighting for science' in their call for a multi-pronged strategy to protect legitimate scientific publishing: tighter oversight of editorial processes, better tools for detecting fabricated research, deeper insight into the networks enabling misconduct, and a fundamental overhaul of science's incentive structures. Their concerns align with the study[94] 'The entities enabling scientific fraud at scale are large, resilient, and growing rapidly', which shows how paper mills, brokers, and predatory journals have become deeply embedded in the research ecosystem. They stress that reforms are urgent, especially before artificial intelligence further infiltrates the scientific record. "If we're not prepared to deal with the fraud that's already occurring, then we're certainly not prepared to deal with what generative AI can do to

[94] Richardson, R.A.K., Hong, S.S., Byrne, J.A., Stoeger, T. and Amaral, L.A.N. (2025). The entities enabling scientific fraud at scale are large, resilient, and growing rapidly. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 122(32). doi:https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2420092122.

scientific literature," Richardson warns. Without action, the boundaries of what counts as scientific fact may blur beyond recognition, feeding AI models that will generate even more questionable work in the future. If organised fraud robs scientists of trust in their own community, the personal and emotional damage may prove the greatest threat to the future of science itself.

"This study is probably the most depressing project I've been involved with in my entire life. Since I was a kid, I was excited about science. It's distressing to see others engage in fraud and in misleading others. But if you believe that science is useful and important for humanity, then you have to fight for it." - Luís A. Nunes Amaral[95]

Honesty under siege

Todd Wilkinson's 'Science Under Siege: The Politicians' War on Nature and Truth[96]' tells the story of scientists working for America's public lands, caught in a growing struggle between ecological truth and political power. These scientists, whose job is to study and protect ecosystems, are increasingly pressured to adjust or suppress their findings to suit political and economic agendas. Their work has become more difficult, not because of nature itself, but because of the political climate that disregards or even attacks science when it stands in the way of profit or ideology. During the 1990s and into the early 2000s, Wilkinson documents how politicians, industry lobbyists, and anti-government activists challenged the role of federal land agencies and those who worked within them. Scientists responsible for monitoring rangelands, forests, and wildlife found themselves sidelined or retaliated against when their findings conflicted with development interests. Even decisions about cattle grazing or timber cutting, once based on ecological data, became political battles. These confrontations discouraged honest research and discouraged the use of sound science in policymaking. Wilkinson highlights the moral struggle of many public servants who remain committed to facts despite the risks. These are not scientists in ivory towers, but people who live in small towns, work in field stations, and often face hostility from neighbours aligned with powerful commercial interests. Their dedication to ecological truth, despite the threats, underscores a broader cultural tension: science as a form of civic duty is being challenged by a political landscape increasingly shaped by misinformation, industry pressure, and populist suspicion. The book also explores how political leaders have used misinformation campaigns to erode trust in public institutions, casting scientists as elitist or untrustworthy. This tactic, Wilkinson argues, undermines both public confidence and environmental protection. As anti-regulatory sentiment grows, scientists are frequently portrayed not as protectors of public resources but as obstacles to economic freedom. This reframing has had real consequences, including threats to personal safety and long-term damage to public lands. Moreover, Wilkinson shows how the media and the public have often been slow to defend these scientists. Scientific complexity does not translate easily into headlines, and in rural communities especially, the narrative of government overreach often wins out over ecological nuance. As a result, the silencing of science becomes normalised, and the long-term health of ecosystems becomes an afterthought. At its core, 'Science Under Siege' is a call to recognise the essential role of science in shaping responsible environmental policy. It warns that if society allows politics to distort facts, the cost will be paid in damaged

[95] Northwestern University (2025). Organized scientific fraud is growing at an alarming rate, study uncovers. [online] Phys.org. Available at: https://phys.org/news/2025-08-scientific-fraud-alarming-uncovers.html [Accessed 10 Aug. 2025].

[96] Wilkinson, T. (2004) Science Under Siege: The Politicians' War on Nature and Truth. Johnson Books.

landscapes, diminished biodiversity, and weakened democratic institutions. Truth is not just a scientific value but a public one.

4.2. Science fraud

(Broken methods, broken trust: The systemic crisis of scientific fraud)

'Let us forget for a moment that some of these false tales produced positive effects… What represents a problem is rather the way they managed to replace other tales that today we consider true'.

— Umberto Eco, Serendipities: Language and Lunacy

'The pressure to publish has become the pressure to fabricate'.

— Stuart Ritchie, Science Fictions

Scientific deception

Science is often imagined as a pure, objective search for truth, guided by integrity and free from personal motives. This belief has granted scientists a level of public trust and reverence that few other professions enjoy. Yet behind this ideal lies a more complicated reality. In 'Scientific Deception: An Overview and Guide to the Literature of Misconduct and Fraud in Scientific Research[97]' Lesley Grayson explains, scientific research is not immune to the flaws and pressures that affect other domains of human behaviour. Misconduct and deception are real and increasingly visible problems that challenge the credibility of science itself. Grayson highlights how public faith in science has begun to erode, especially as conflicting claims emerge even within the same field. Opposing studies on similar topics often reach contradictory conclusions. This inconsistency can leave people confused and sceptical. The problem is not always a matter of deliberate fraud. More often, subtle pressures—such as funding expectations, career advancement, or ideological commitments—shape how data is collected, interpreted, and reported. Scientists, like anyone else, are influenced by their environments. The word 'deception' in this context does not refer only to criminal behaviour. It includes a range of ethical lapses, from outright fabrication to biased study designs and selective data reporting. The pressure to publish in prestigious journals and to secure grants fuels this environment. Researchers may feel compelled to present their findings in ways that emphasise novelty or significance, even when the data are weak or inconclusive. Sponsors and commercial interests may also influence outcomes, particularly in fields like pharmaceutical research, where billions are at stake. Grayson also draws attention to the weaknesses in the systems that are supposed to detect and correct these problems. Peer review, while central to scientific publishing, can be conservative, inconsistent, or biased. Replication of results—another key pillar of scientific credibility—is rarely attempted, especially in high-cost or high-stakes research. This means that flawed or fraudulent studies can persist unchallenged for years. Much of the current discussion around scientific integrity focuses on rare and egregious cases of fraud. While these are certainly damaging, they may distract from more systemic issues. Widespread but less visible biases, often driven by structural and institutional pressures, can distort the scientific record far more than isolated incidents of misconduct. The challenge is not just to catch bad actors, but to

[97] Grayson, L. (1981) Scientific Deception: An Overview and Guide to the Literature of Misconduct and Fraud in Scientific Research. British Library.

reshape the research environment in ways that discourage subtle forms of dishonesty and encourage openness. Grayson argues for a more honest recognition of the human factors in science. Transparency about funding sources, institutional affiliations, and potential conflicts of interest should become standard practice. Efforts to include diverse perspectives, particularly those that challenge dominant assumptions, may also strengthen scientific objectivity. Scientific deception—whether intentional or not—undermines the credibility of science and weakens public trust. The solution lies not only in stricter regulation, but in cultural and institutional change that prioritises integrity over productivity.

Necessity to publish negative results

In 'The Science Reproducibility Crisis and the Necessity to Publish Negative Results[98]', José González Martín-Moro examines the growing concerns surrounding reproducibility in scientific research and highlights how this undermines the credibility of scientific findings when studies cannot be reliably replicated. The broader publication of negative results as a critical step towards enhancing transparency, reducing publication bias, and fortifying the integrity of the scientific enterprise. Scientific research depends on the ability to replicate results. Yet, many researchers find that this is increasingly difficult. Survey showed that more than 70 percent of scientists had failed to reproduce another researcher's experiment. Even more troubling, 60 percent were unable to replicate their own findings. The problem is most acute in medicine and biology, where variables are complex and small changes can produce vastly different outcomes. But beyond technical reasons, a deeper issue drives the crisis—publication bias. Positive results dominate scientific journals. Around 90 percent of published studies report successful outcomes. This raises a simple question: are researchers unusually accurate, or are negative results simply going unpublished? The trend is not new. In 1959, Sterling found that all published articles in leading journals reported positive findings. Over time, this bias has only worsened. Editors prefer success stories, and researchers often shelve studies that fall short of statistical significance. If a result does not cross the p-value threshold, it may be considered uninteresting, and the work ends up in a drawer, unseen and unused. This habit distorts the scientific record. When only positive outcomes are visible, the community gets a false sense of certainty. Failed experiments and inconclusive data vanish, even though they are just as informative. The result is a skewed understanding of scientific progress and a heightened risk of false positives. Especially in areas like drug development, where early studies often show promise, the lack of negative follow-up studies creates unrealistic expectations. High-impact journals prioritise novelty, not reliability. Publishing mistakes and failures might seem unappealing, but it is essential. Dead ends reveal as much about reality as breakthroughs do. When a method fails, it teaches other researchers what not to try. If these lessons remain hidden, others may repeat the same fruitless paths, wasting time and resources. Moreover, sharing negative findings helps refine future research. It narrows the field and leads scientists toward more promising approaches. There is also an ethical dimension. The current academic culture rewards quantity over substance. Researchers are pushed to produce results that will get published, often at the expense of honesty. This pressure encourages selective reporting and even questionable research practices. Publishing all results, whether they succeed or not, shifts the focus from prestige to truth. It builds a healthier, more transparent environment where the value of knowledge outweighs the urge to impress. The reproducibility crisis is not only about flawed experiments. It reflects a systemic issue with how science is communicated. To move

[98] González Martín-Moro, J. (2020) The Science Reproducibility Crisis and the Necessity to Publish Negative Results. Research Ethics, 16(2), pp. 1–5.

forward, the scientific community must embrace all results. Publishing negative findings will not bring instant acclaim, but it will support long-term progress. Mistakes, false starts, and failed hypotheses are not embarrassing—they are part of the process.

Reproducibility in the age of digital medicine

In 'The Reproducibility Crisis in the Age of Digital Medicine[99]', Stupple, Singerman, and Celi explore the challenges of ensuring reliable and replicable findings amid the rapid integration of digital technologies in healthcare. They highlight how issues such as data heterogeneity, inadequate reporting standards, and overfitting in machine learning models threaten the validity of digital medicine, calling for stronger methodological rigor and transparency to uphold clinical trust and patient safety. Digital medicine has expanded rapidly, driven by advances in computing, access to large datasets, and the rise of machine learning. These tools are transforming healthcare, from predicting patient outcomes to interpreting medical images. The field holds great promise. But with this promise comes a pressing concern: can these findings be trusted? The reproducibility crisis that has troubled other areas of science may be approaching digital medicine as well. Reproducibility means that independent researchers can repeat an experiment and arrive at the same results. It is a cornerstone of scientific reliability. But many studies, especially in psychology and biomedicine, have failed to meet this standard. A 2015 project by the Centre for Open Science could only replicate 39 of 100 psychology studies. In 2016, a 'Nature' survey revealed that reproducibility problems extended to multiple scientific fields. Biomedicine showed the most concern, and for good reason—clinical decisions rely on solid evidence. The factors behind the crisis are well known. Flawed statistics, selective reporting, and pressure to publish positive results all contribute. In the rush to make headlines or secure funding, researchers may sacrifice rigor. Peer review often fails to catch these problems. Digital medicine, with its emphasis on novel algorithms and data analysis, risks repeating these same mistakes unless it changes course. There is also a deeper issue: the tension between innovation and reliability. Science thrives on bold ideas, but those ideas must be assessed and confirmed. In the 17th century, Robert Boyle and the Royal Society pushed for reproducibility through what Boyle called 'virtual witnessing'. Scientists were encouraged to follow detailed methods so others could repeat the results. But even then, written accounts proved insufficient. Replication required more than just access to the text—it needed careful observation and shared standards. In digital medicine today, the same problem persists, though in a new form. A paper may describe an algorithm, but without access to the data, code, and parameters, replication is difficult. Minor changes in data processing can lead to vastly different results. Moreover, many machine learning models are treated as black boxes, offering impressive outputs without clear explanations. This opacity undermines trust. To avoid a full-blown crisis, digital medicine must embrace rigorous and transparent practices. This means sharing data and code, using better statistical methods, and improving peer review to prioritise replication. The field should also value studies that confirm or refute earlier results, not just those that claim to break new ground. The stakes are high. Digital medicine touches on real lives and healthcare decisions. If its findings cannot be replicated, trust in the field will erode. As history shows, science progresses not only through discovery but through careful verification. Digital medicine must learn from past mistakes and build a culture that values both innovation and reliability.

[99] Stupple, A., Singerman, D., and Celi, L. A. (2019) The Reproducibility Crisis in the Age of Digital Medicine. npj Digital Medicine, 2(2).

A statistical counterattack

In 'The Reproducibility Crisis in Science: A Statistical Counterattack[100]', Roger D. Peng addresses the growing concern over irreproducible scientific results by advocating for stronger statistical practices and greater data transparency. He argues that reproducibility is not a luxury but a fundamental component of scientific integrity and proposes reproducible research as a practical remedy to restore trust in scientific findings. In the last two decades, the ability to collect data has expanded rapidly. Thanks to cheaper sensors, digital devices, and growing computational power, people are generating vast amounts of data every day. Health, economics, biology—every field now benefits from massive datasets. But while collecting data has become easier, making sense of it has not. The gap between data collection and proper analysis is growing. This has fuelled a crisis in scientific reproducibility. Replication—when independent researchers reproduce the results of a study using their own data and methods—has always been a standard of good science. Reproducibility, in a computational sense, means rerunning the original analysis with the same data and code to get the same results. Both are crucial to verifying scientific claims. Yet too often, studies either fail to replicate or produce misleading results, even when they can technically be reproduced. Several well-known examples show how this plays out. In 2006, a research group at Duke University claimed to have created a genomic tool to predict cancer patients' responses to chemotherapy. When statisticians from MD Anderson Cancer Centre tried to validate the findings, they found serious flaws in the analysis, including mislabelled data and computational errors. In economics, a 2010 paper by Reinhart and Rogoff argued that high levels of government debt hurt economic growth. Their study was influential in shaping global austerity policies. But a graduate student discovered that they had made spreadsheet errors and excluded relevant data. Their conclusions collapsed under scrutiny. In both cases, the studies were technically reproducible. Anyone could re-run the code and get the same results. The problem was that the analyses were flawed from the start. The issue was not about sharing data—it was about how that data was used. These examples show that reproducibility alone is not enough. Good science also requires good statistical practice. Roger Peng argues that the real solution lies in education. The current system of peer review often fails to catch poor analysis. Reviewers typically do not have time—or sometimes the expertise—to recheck statistical methods in detail. Instead of relying on fixes after publication, the focus should shift to prevention. Scientists must be trained in data analysis, not just data collection. Peng emphasises the need for reproducible tools, sound software, and a clear understanding of statistical principles. To meet this need, Peng and colleagues at Johns Hopkins developed the Data Science Specialisation, a series of courses aimed at teaching scientists and students how to work with data properly. But education at scale is just one part of the solution. Science also needs better standards, open tools, and a culture that values careful analysis over flashy results. The reproducibility crisis is not just about bad luck or isolated mistakes. It reflects a systemic failure to match scientific ambition with statistical discipline. Better training in data science can help prevent errors before they happen—and restore confidence in research.

Publication bias

Publication bias continues to distort the scientific record by favouring positive results over null or negative ones. This imbalance not only misrepresents the state of scientific knowledge but also undermines credibility. Several strategies have emerged to counteract this problem and promote more transparent, inclusive research practices, as discussed in 'The

[100] Peng, R. D. (2015) The Reproducibility Crisis in Science: A Statistical Counterattack. Significance, 12(3), pp. 30–32.

Reproducibility Crisis and What to Do About It[101]' by R. Barker Bausell. One of the most direct responses is the active submission of negative results. Researchers are encouraged not to give up after a single rejection, since the current publishing landscape includes a wide range of journals—many of which are open to studies that challenge prevailing assumptions. Equally important is how these results are framed. Authors should clearly explain why the absence of an effect matters, and what it contributes to the field. Transparency about methodological issues is also valued during peer review, reinforcing the idea that rigor outweighs novelty. Presenting negative findings at academic conferences is another powerful tool. These venues allow researchers to communicate their results informally, even if formal publication is delayed. In cases where travel is restricted, collaborators or colleagues can step in to share the work, ensuring it still reaches the academic community. Serving as peer reviewers or journal editors can also make a difference. Researchers in these roles are urged to assess studies based on the soundness of their design and analysis, rather than whether the results are statistically significant. Shifting the focus to methodology helps decentre the publication obsession with striking conclusions. Preprint archives, such as arXiv and bioRxiv, have become valuable platforms for bypassing editorial bias. These repositories allow studies to be disseminated without traditional peer review, offering a space where negative or inconclusive findings can be shared openly. They also allow for detailed documentation since word limits are less of an issue. Among the most promising developments is the model of Registered Reports. Introduced by Chris Chambers and others, this approach restructures the review process by evaluating studies before data is collected. At stage one, researchers submit their hypothesis and methods for peer review. If approved, the journal agrees to publish the study regardless of the outcome, provided the methodology is followed. This reduces questionable research practices and reorients the publishing system toward quality rather than results. Negative results often have greater long-term validity. For instance, a study on clinical trials for liver diseases found that negative conclusions were more likely to remain valid over time than positive ones. This suggests that what seems less exciting may be more accurate. Finally, education and mentorship are crucial. Future scientists need training not just in technical skills, but in responsible research practices. This includes understanding replication, statistical power, and the ethical importance of publishing all results. Projects like CREP encourage undergraduates to engage in replication, instilling values of transparency early on. These strategies point toward a more balanced and honest scientific culture—one where results are valued for their contribution, not just their novelty.

Language of health care deception

In 'Sickening: How Big Pharma Broke American Health Care and How We Can Repair It[102]', John Abramson exposes the systemic deception strategies used by pharmaceutical companies to distort scientific evidence, mislead doctors, and prioritise profit over patient well-being. He reveals how manipulated clinical trials, hidden data, and aggressive marketing have corrupted medical knowledge and undermined public trust in healthcare. The American health care system, despite its technological advances, delivers some of the worst outcomes among wealthy nations. With one in five dollars of GDP spent on health, the United States continues to fall behind in life expectancy, chronic disease management, and health equity. According to John Abramson, this is not a failure of medicine itself, but of the system designed around it—

[101] Bausell, R. B. (2021) The Reproducibility Crisis and What to Do About It. Oxford University Press.
[102] Abramson, J. (2022) Sickening: How Big Pharma Broke American Health Care and How We Can Repair It. Mariner Books.

particularly the influence of pharmaceutical companies that shape what treatments get researched, promoted, and prescribed. Over the past forty years, drug companies have taken control of the clinical research agenda. As public funding shrank, private corporations filled the gap, directing research not toward better health outcomes but toward products that maximise shareholder returns. These companies now oversee every part of the research pipeline: the design of studies, the analysis of data, and the publication of findings. Much of the medical information doctors rely on is filtered through this lens, leaving them unaware of how biased that information may be. While some drugs offer real breakthroughs, many offer only marginal benefits, often at inflated prices. These high costs disproportionately affect American patients, since the U.S. is the primary market driving global pharmaceutical profits. Marketing campaigns push expensive medications while downplaying affordable alternatives. Worse, the system encourages overprescription—evident in the opioid epidemic, where companies knowingly minimised the risks of addiction to boost sales. The pandemic exposed this imbalance further. Although much of the vaccine research was publicly funded, private firms claimed the credit and set prices as they saw fit. The government failed to negotiate lower costs or ensure global distribution, instead allowing companies to profit from public desperation. These decisions reflected a system in which profit, not public health, takes precedence. Abramson's legal and medical work highlights how corporations often conceal or distort negative trial results. In lawsuits involving drugs like Vioxx and Bextra, he uncovered internal documents showing how companies misled both regulators and the public. Yet even when companies are found guilty of wrongdoing, fines are absorbed as business expenses, and key executives rarely face accountability. The structural problems run deep. Academic medical centres, journals, and even federal regulators are often financially entangled with the same industry they are meant to oversee. The approval of ineffective drugs like Aduhelm, despite internal objections, illustrates how commercial pressure overrides medical judgment. The result is a system bloated by waste, riddled with inequality, and unable to deliver consistent or affordable care. Fixing this will not be easy. It demands a shift in political will and public perception. Reform must break the cycle of influence and return medical research to public service. That means greater transparency, independent oversight, and funding structures that prioritise health, not returns. The illusion of American medical superiority has allowed this system to persist. This illusion has been sustained not by facts, but by a carefully constructed language—buzzwords like 'innovation', slogans like 'breakthrough therapy', and PR narratives that mask corporate interests as scientific progress. By controlling the discourse, Big Pharma has sold mistrust as care, and profit as health, turning language itself into the most potent drug of all.

Doctoring data

In 'Impure Science: Fraud, Compromise, and Political Influence in Scientific Research[103]' (1992), Robert Bell investigates how scientific integrity is often compromised by institutional pressures, financial incentives, and political agendas. He reveals how the manipulation of research—what might be euphemistically called 'doctoring data'—is not merely a breach of ethics, but a systemic feature of how science operates under corporate and state influence. The case of Stephen Breuning stands as a disturbing example of scientific fraud and the institutional failures that allowed it to persist. Breuning, a former researcher at the University of Pittsburgh, admitted in 1988 to fabricating data in studies funded by federal grants. His work focused on

[103] Bell, R. (1992) Impure Science: Fraud, Compromise, and Political Influence in Scientific Research. Berkeley: University of California Press.

drug treatments for mentally disabled children and recommended the use of stimulants, despite evidence that such medications worsened behaviour. His false findings directly influenced treatment protocols and public policy. Breuning's fraud came to light thanks to his mentor, Dr. Robert Sprague, who noticed inconsistencies in the research. Sprague investigated on his own and discovered that some studies, like one conducted at Coldwater Regional Centre, were completely fictitious. Breuning had not even been at the site when he claimed to have collected the data. More red flags emerged, such as reported 100 per cent agreement between nurses observing behavioural changes in children—statistically implausible. Sprague brought his concerns to the National Institute of Mental Health in 1983, calling not only for scrutiny of the Coldwater study but for a comprehensive review of Breuning's entire body of work. Initially, the University of Pittsburgh conducted a narrow internal inquiry and did not extend the investigation to his broader research. Even after Breuning confessed to falsifying data, the university closed the case. It was not until the media reported the scandal that the National Institute of Mental Health convened an external panel, which eventually concluded that all Breuning's work was fabricated. Despite doing the right thing, Sprague paid a steep price for exposing the fraud. The university sought to discredit him, accusing him of making false statements. NIMH slashed his funding, which Sprague believed was retaliation for his whistleblowing. He received little support from the scientific community—only one of Breuning's 30 coauthors publicly defended him. This lack of solidarity underscored the reluctance of researchers to speak out against misconduct, even in clear cases. Breuning's fraudulent research caused harm not only to science but also to vulnerable patients. It influenced treatment guidelines and diverted resources from legitimate studies. Yet the institutions involved failed to act swiftly or thoroughly. Instead of enforcing scientific standards, they protected reputations and funding pipelines. The lesson here is that misconduct often goes unpunished while truth-tellers face isolation and reprisal. This episode reveals the structural weaknesses in how scientific fraud is investigated and how whistleblowers are treated. Institutional self-interest, bureaucratic inertia, and fear of controversy too often outweigh the pursuit of truth. The Breuning case, documented in Robert Bell's 'Impure Science', serves as a warning: without transparency and accountability, science risks losing the very credibility it relies upon. Such linguistic strategies mask deception as innovation, turning scientific fraud into a calculated business opportunity rather than an aberration. Instead of fighting illness, institutions often construct a facade of progress, where manipulated results serve branding, investment, and influence more than truth or health.

Science for hire

The tobacco industry's strategy to challenge the health risks of second-hand smoke was neither scientific nor impartial. It was a deliberate effort to manipulate public understanding and stall government regulation. In their article 'Science for Hire: A Tobacco Industry Strategy to Influence Public Opinion on Secondhand Smoke[104]', Monique E. Muggli, Richard D. Hurt, and D. Douglas Blanke uncover how tobacco companies orchestrated a global campaign to distort the science of environmental tobacco smoke (ETS), disguising industry interests under a layer of scientific credibility. Central to this campaign was the ETS Consultants Program, a carefully constructed network of scientists who would serve as credible messengers to question the dangers of second-hand smoke. The program was not driven by researchers or public health experts but by lawyers working for the tobacco industry. These attorneys designed and managed

[104] Muggli, M. E., Hurt, R. D., and Blanke, D. D. (2003) 'Science for Hire: A Tobacco Industry Strategy to Influence Public Opinion on Secondhand Smoke', Tobacco Control, 12(1), pp. 140–146.

the operation to ensure that all public-facing scientific activity aligned with corporate goals. By placing lawyers between the consultants and the companies, they could shield tobacco firms from direct association while guiding the message. The industry recruited scientists not only from the United States but also from Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Selection was based on scientific credentials, political influence, and willingness to align with industry narratives. These consultants were paid to attend conferences, publish studies, and submit letters to newspapers, all aimed at promoting doubt about the harms of second-hand smoke. Many acted as expert witnesses in legal or regulatory settings, using their status to challenge restrictions on indoor smoking. Tobacco companies went further by creating front organisations, like Indoor Air International, which functioned as seemingly independent voices promoting industry-friendly views on air quality. These groups gave legitimacy to claims that second-hand smoke was not a major health concern, a message that contradicted the growing scientific consensus. At the same time, the consultants helped flood the media with op-eds, interviews, and studies that challenged the World Health Organisation and national health agencies. What made this campaign so effective was its appearance of scientific neutrality. By hiring academics and professionals, the tobacco industry gave the impression that there was legitimate debate within the scientific community. The debate was manufactured. The goal was never to uncover the truth but to delay regulation, confuse policymakers, and maintain the profitability of tobacco products. The ETS Consultants Program cost millions, but it paid off by postponing smoking bans and weakening public health campaigns. It exposed how science can be used not to clarify but to confuse, especially when manipulated by corporate interests. The program was not just about protecting profits; it was about controlling the conversation around health and responsibility.

Pay-to-Publish science

In 'The 'Pay-to-Publish' Model Should Be Abolished[105]'(2021), Raghavendra Gadagkar critiques the growing dominance of publication systems that require researchers to pay for their work to appear in journals. He argues that this model creates perverse incentives, privileging visibility over validity and distorting the scientific process in favour of those with funding rather than those with insight. Gadagkar argues that the current model of scholarly publishing, where authors pay to have their work published and readers access it for free, is fundamentally flawed. This so-called open access system has been presented as a progressive solution to the problem of expensive academic journals. But it shifts the financial burden from readers to authors and continues to enrich commercial publishers at the cost of equity and quality in research. Initially, research funders—both public and private—were frustrated by having to pay twice: first to support the research, and then again to access the results locked behind expensive journal subscriptions. Open access was meant to fix this by making published work freely available. Yet, under the pay-to-publish model, funders still pay twice—now funding both the research and its publication. The profits, again, go to commercial publishers. This model worsens existing inequalities in the academic world. Scholars from well-funded institutions can afford high publication fees. But for researchers in poorer regions or underfunded institutions, these fees can be prohibitive. The result is a growing divide between those who can afford to publish and those who cannot. Open access, in this form, becomes a mechanism for reinforcing academic hierarchies rather than breaking them down. The rise of predatory journals only deepens the crisis. These outlets, often little more than publishing scams, charge authors fees

[105] Gadagkar, R. (2021) 'The "Pay-to-Publish" Model Should Be Abolished', Current Science, 121(11), pp. 1383–1384.

and accept any submission, regardless of quality. In 2014 alone, more than 420,000 articles were published in such journals, generating millions in revenue. The problem lies not just in individual bad actors but in the structure of the pay-to-publish model itself, which creates incentives for quantity over quality. Gadagkar suggests an alternative: a model where a portion of research funding is set aside to support journals that are free to publish in and free to read. These could be run by academic societies or other nonprofit organisations. Unlike commercial publishers, these groups have no interest in exploiting the system for profit. Their goal would be to maintain quality and provide genuine access to knowledge. Such a shift would require social and legal support. Institutions and researchers would need to recognise and reward publication in non-commercial journals. Legal frameworks could also help diminish the legitimacy of profit-driven publishing models. Over time, paid journals could lose their influence as credibility shifts toward open and ethical platforms. Gadagkar's proposal is not only practical but ethical. The pay-to-publish system compromises academic integrity and excludes those without financial resources. A fairer model is possible—one that protects the values of scholarship and ensures that research serves everyone, not just those who can afford to participate. By turning knowledge into a transactional product, this system encourages the linguistic inflation of results—where language is tailored not to illuminate, but to impress reviewers and attract citations. What emerges is not clarity or truth, but a performance of legitimacy, where the polished appearance of science masks deeper distortions.

4.3. Overproduction of truth

(Truth inflation: When scientific knowledge becomes noise)

'Too many facts crowd out the truth'.

— Paul Valéry, Tel quel (1941)

Overproduction of truth

In 'The Overproduction of Truth: Passion, Competition, and Integrity in Modern Science[106]', Gianfranco Pacchioni offers a stark reflection on how scientific culture has shifted under the weight of its own expansion. What began as a calling for a few driven individuals has turned into a global profession defined by metrics, pressure, and constant output. With over ten million researchers working today and tens of millions projected in the coming decades, science is growing—but not always in the right direction. Pacchioni traces this transformation through the lens of history and personal experience. Once, science unfolded slowly. Communication took time, and breakthroughs were rare but significant. Scientists like Newton and Leibniz debated ideas through letters, respectful and deliberate. Even into the 20th century, figures like Fermi and Pasteur worked in environments that allowed space for thought and ethical rigor. Today, however, the pace is unrelenting. The Internet, once seen as a tool for greater access and collaboration, has become a double-edged sword. It accelerates the spread of information but also encourages superficiality, hastiness, and an obsession with being first. This shift has changed what it means to be a scientist. Pacchioni notes how young researchers now face intense competition and expectations to produce constantly. Success is often measured by the number of publications, not the depth of insight. In such a climate, ethical considerations are at

[106] Pacchioni, G. (2021) The Overproduction of Truth: Passion, Competition, and Integrity in Modern Science. Springer.

risk. Integrity, once central to the practice of science, now competes with the lure of recognition and speed. He recounts the case of a PhD candidate whose degree was suspended due to plagiarism. The incident shocked everyone involved, but it also exposed a deeper truth. The pressure to publish had pushed the student to cut corners, echoing a broader trend. In many institutions, such behaviour is quietly tolerated or overlooked, especially when it leads to results. Years later, the student went on to become a professor—proof that even serious ethical breaches might be forgotten if academic success follows. Pacchioni does not stop at anecdotes. He discusses how plagiarism detection software has become a necessary tool, revealing widespread copying not only of text but also of images and data. Yet even these tools have limits. Ideas can be reworded and repackaged without raising alarms. In rapidly expanding scientific communities, where oversight is limited and publication is rewarded primarily, the temptation to plagiarise becomes harder to resist. What emerges is not just a story about dishonesty, but about a deeper erosion of values. Science is producing more than ever, but it is also risking the loss of what makes it trustworthy. Pacchioni sees this as a crisis—not of science's capacity, but of its purpose and direction. Quantity has outpaced quality, and the race to produce has replaced the desire to understand. Unless the scientific community reclaims its commitment to ethics and reflection, the overproduction of truth may lead to its collapse. The warning is clear: integrity must matter more than output, or science will lose the trust it depends on.

Where does science go?

Gianfranco Pacchioni, in 'The Overproduction of Truth', confronts a troubling reality: science is growing too fast for its own good. In the early 20th century, there were around 180,000 active researchers. By 1990, that number had passed 300,000. Today, it exceeds ten million. Alongside this growth, more than two million scientific papers are published each year. While these numbers suggest incredible progress, they also raise serious questions about quality, ethics, and sustainability. Pacchioni argues that science, once defined by depth, has shifted toward volume. The intimate, idea-driven exchanges of earlier generations have been replaced by massive conferences where thousands present fleeting summaries of their work. Instead of extended debate and deep collaboration, poster sessions and networking events dominate. The scientific community has become too large, too fast, and the race to publish has outpaced the time needed for thoughtful inquiry. This pressure to produce has consequences. Young scientists are caught in a system where securing permanent academic positions feels increasingly out of reach. Postdoctoral researchers often move from one temporary contract to another, chasing prestige and funding. The dream of a stable academic life has faded into a reality of constant competition, and with it comes burnout, disillusionment, and ethical compromise. The expansion of PhD programs has played a central role. Institutions produce more doctoral graduates than they can absorb, leading to an oversupply of highly trained individuals with few clear career paths. As competition intensifies, the incentive to cut corners grows. Data manipulation, plagiarism, and rushed results are no longer isolated cases. They are symptoms of a system that rewards speed and quantity over care and truth. Pacchioni describes this not simply as a moral failing but as a structural flaw. The model of scientific productivity has become unsustainable. Some have proposed radical solutions, such as limiting the number of papers a scientist can publish in their lifetime or allocating 'publication tokens' to encourage selectivity and thoughtfulness. While these ideas may seem extreme, they signal a growing awareness that science needs to slow down. Public trust is also at stake. In a world flooded with contradictory studies and sensational claims, people struggle to distinguish between credible research and misinformation. When scientists themselves are caught up in scandals, public

confidence declines further. If science is to maintain its authority in guiding decisions on climate, health, and technology, it must reaffirm its commitment to transparency, accuracy, and ethics. The crisis, as Pacchioni presents it, is not hopeless—but it is urgent. Scientists must reclaim their role not only as discoverers but as stewards of knowledge. This means resisting the pressure to publish endlessly, insisting on quality over volume, and mentoring the next generation with integrity. It also means engaging society in an honest dialogue about what science is, what it can truly offer, and what it risks becoming. Science today is oversupplying data at an unprecedented rate, generating a torrent of findings, models, and conclusions that exceed the public's—and often scientists'—capacity to absorb or interpret them. The scientific image of the world has become so intricate, layered, and fragmented that it no longer clarifies reality but overwhelms it. This excess risks turning science from a tool of understanding into a machine of complexity, where knowledge becomes inaccessible and authority replaces meaning. Such a structure mirrors the model of religious knowledge under theocratic rule, where guarded truths and hierarchical control dictated what could be known and who was permitted to know it.

Oversupply of facts

In the information economy, facts have become the new commodities. Just as overproduction in classical economics describes the excessive output of goods beyond consumer demand, today's world suffers from an oversupply of facts, words, ideas, slogans, books, articles, and scientific studies—far beyond the capacity of society to meaningfully absorb, interpret, or act upon them. This glut of information does not lead to enlightenment but to confusion, disorientation, and, paradoxically, ignorance. As with material goods in capitalism, the production of knowledge is no longer guided by genuine need, but by profit, prestige, and competitive pressure to publish and speak. In this epistemic marketplace, institutions and individuals continually generate content—research papers, news stories, expert opinions, and historical evidence—flooding the public sphere with overlapping, contradictory, or trivial claims. The more facts are produced, the more difficult it becomes to discern which are relevant or reliable. Language itself becomes saturated, losing its referential clarity. Ideas circulate without anchoring, stripped from context and function, repeating in endless loops across platforms and headlines. As in the case of overproduction of goods, this overproduction of facts leads not to abundance in understanding, but to a collapse of epistemic value—what might be called intellectual deflation. This crisis mirrors the capitalist cycle where oversupply leads to falling prices and unsold inventories. Here, the surplus of facts cheapens meaning. Slogans replace analysis, buzzwords substitute for argument, and publications outpace reflection. The system rewards the volume of output over depth, novelty over nuance, visibility over veracity. In academia, the pressure to publish leads to fragmented or redundant studies, in media, the need for attention favours sensationalism over substance. Just as overproduced goods are sometimes discarded or devalued, information is now consumed rapidly, forgotten quickly, and often discarded before it is digested. The abundance of facts paradoxically results in a famine of understanding. The structural cause is the same: overinvestment in production infrastructure without proportional concern for use, application, or comprehension. The digital revolution, like the industrial one before it, has enabled an unprecedented acceleration of production. But when every subject generates thousands of articles, and every debate is instantly refracted through a thousand rhetorical prisms, knowledge fragments into noise. The result is a paralysis of judgment. Like unsold goods cluttering warehouses, unprocessed facts fill archives, timelines, and minds with unusable excess. What Henry George observed about economic goods applies here to intellectual ones: the problem is not absolute overproduction,

but relative excess. One may crave insight but drown in irrelevant detail. One might need coherence yet face a torrent of disconnected assertions. The disproportion between different types of information—like between shoes and handkerchiefs in George's example—means that some ideas are overproduced while others, often those most urgently needed, remain neglected. The imbalance is not just informational but ethical, privileging what is profitable or clickable over what is vital or true. Marx identified in capitalism a tragic paradox: material plenty coexisting with spiritual and social poverty. Today's epistemological crisis reflects a similar condition—cognitive abundance alongside a collapse of meaning. More facts do not yield more truth, just as more products do not ensure well-being. Instead, the oversupply of facts creates new power structures: those who can manipulate the flow, frame the discourse, or declare what counts as knowledge now control the means of epistemic production. Unless this cycle is broken—unless meaning is restored through restraint, discernment, and genuine epistemic care—the overproduction of facts will continue to erode the very possibility of understanding. In this new economy of thought, clarity has become scarce, and knowledge—like truth—risk becoming unsellable.

'Say More Law'

Say's Law of markets, named after French economist Jean-Baptiste Say, holds that producing goods and services generates the income to buy them, so supply creates its own demand and general overproduction cannot persist. Say's Law, reimagined for the age of information, might read: 'The more words produced, the more those words generate demand for even more words'. In this worldview, expression becomes both currency and commodity—each opinion, theory, or slogan not only fulfils a desire to speak but creates the perceived need for someone else to say something else in response. As Keynes once paraphrased, 'supply creates its own demand'—but in the economy of discourse, the oversupply of ideas fuels a cycle of compulsive reproduction, where statements are exchanged not for truth, but for other statements. One speaks, writes, or posts not to reach understanding, but to remain part of the great churn of mutual citation, trending reaction, and intellectual pageantry. In this regime, there is no true excess of speech—just unprocessed language waiting for rebranding. Every claim becomes justification for the next claim. Every article demands a counterpoint, every insight a hot take. 'Say more', the algorithm whispers—not because meaning is lacking, but because engagement is everything. In this rhetorical marketplace, one's ability to speak establishes one is right to be heard, and one's relevance depends not on clarity or depth, but on output. No demand can exist without prior assertion. To critique, you must first contribute. To resist, you must amplify. The cycle is self-sustaining. Of course, overproduction of language raises its own ecological questions—not of landfills, but of mindfills. The byproduct of all this expressive productivity is not plastic or carbon dioxide, but cognitive overload, epistemic fatigue, and semantic pollution. Meaning becomes the linguistic equivalent of smog: omnipresent, formless, and increasingly toxic. Concepts lose their edges through overuse. Slogans crowd out arguments. Metaphors mutate into hashtags. The intellectual environment is degraded not by silence, but by compulsive repetition. The costs are real. More metaphors than necessary are extracted from cultural memory, mined from ancient texts, or quarried from past revolutions. More theoretical models are emitted, each claiming to explain the world more accurately than the last, while creating a fog through which no world can clearly be seen. Ideas become debris—floating, overlapping, never settling. Just as physical overproduction wastes materials, informational overproduction wastes attention and dissolves trust. But in the world of 'Say More', none of this is a flaw—it is the model. The ability to generate discourse has become an end. Institutions reward frequency over substance, platforms favour virality over verification,

and public opinion is shaped less by deliberation than by saturation. In the modern marketplace of ideas, Say's law has mutated into a cycle of compulsive expression, where each word, theory, or opinion generates demand for more of the same. This oversupply of discourse floods attention spans, dilutes meaning, and turns knowledge into noise. Like surplus goods, surplus ideas lose value, creating a glut of unread articles, unexamined claims, and rhetorical pollution. Rather than fostering understanding, the system rewards volume over clarity, reaction over reflection. In this 'Say More' linguistic economy, truth becomes secondary to visibility, and intellectual overproduction mirrors its industrial counterpart—producing not insight, but excess. Overproduction of language is no longer an unintended consequence—it is the default condition of thought under informational capitalism. And under this law, silence is not gold but failure. 'Say More' is not a suggestion. It is a demand embedded in the infrastructure of visibility, credibility, and power. To say less is to disappear. To stop speaking is to lose one's place in the economy of presence. There may be no such thing as too many words—for those who profit from noise. But for those seeking understanding, Say's Law has become a trap: a law of diminishing meaning enforced by excess.

The epistemological crisis

In 'The Epistemological (Not Reproducibility) Crisis[107]'John Park argues that what is often called the reproducibility crisis in science is an epistemological crisis. The problem is not simply that some studies cannot be replicated. It is that much of the knowledge claimed by scientific papers is not knowledge at all. This is especially true in medicine, where statistical methods like null hypothesis testing and the standard P-value threshold of 0.05 have created a flood of results that are misleading, shallow, or false. Park identifies three underlying problems: the problem of induction, the limits of epistemological access, and the dangers of information overload—what he calls the iatrogenics of information. The problem of induction is philosophical but real. Scientific knowledge builds on the assumption that past patterns can predict future outcomes. But this kind of reasoning has no absolute guarantee. You can collect as much data as you want and still be wrong. The second issue, epistemological access, refers to how raw data often fails to capture the complexity of the phenomena under study. Simple measurements may not connect meaningfully to the truths scientists are trying to uncover. Finally, the iatrogenics of information suggests that too much low-quality data can harm science. In medicine, it can lead to bad decisions and failed treatments. Yet, as Park points out, the crisis is deeper than the replication of results. It is about the erosion of scientific meaning. The misuse of statistics—through practices like P-hacking or data dredging—encourages researchers to produce results that appear significant but are meaningless. Journals, pressured to publish novel findings, rarely reward careful or negative results. The system prioritises quantity over insight. Thomas Kuhn's theory of scientific revolutions helps make sense of this. In 'The Structure of Scientific Revolutions', Kuhn described how science does not progress in a straight line. Instead, it lurches from one dominant worldview, or paradigm, to another when the old one can no longer explain new data. A crisis emerges when anomalies accumulate—observations that do not fit—and scientists begin to question the tools, assumptions, and goals of their work. In Park's view, science today may be reaching such a point. The dominant paradigm—relying on significance testing and narrow statistical inference—is faltering. Researchers are producing mountains of papers, but confidence in their findings is falling. Scientists are starting to ask deeper questions about what counts as evidence and how truth is

[107] Park, J. (2020) 'The Epistemological (Not Reproducibility) Crisis', The American Journal of Medicine, 133(1), pp. 5–6.

established. This is not just a methodological problem. It strikes at the heart of scientific epistemology. If the structures used to validate knowledge are failing, then the knowledge itself is unstable. This calls not for minor reforms but for a broader transformation. A new paradigm may need to emerge—one that focuses less on formal significance and more on the robustness, clarity, and transparency of evidence.

Consequences of false language

The epistemological crisis reveals that the language of science, once trusted as a vehicle for truth, has become a system of rhetorical control—generating authority rather than understanding. Scientific discourse now often produces not knowledge of reality, but elaborate frameworks of statistical persuasion designed to influence public opinion, secure funding, and maintain institutional power. What masquerades as objective insight is frequently little more than performative certainty, built on unstable foundations. In this sense, science no longer uncovers the nature of things but constructs narratives that fit within prevailing paradigms and power structures. The crisis is not merely about faulty methods or irreproducible results—it is about a loss of epistemic credibility, where language no longer refers meaningfully to the world. Until this is confronted, scientific language will continue to circulate as ideology, not as inquiry. The crisis shaking modern science is not just about the failure to replicate experiments. As John Park argues, it is an epistemological crisis, rooted in flawed methods for producing and validating knowledge. This collapse of certainty spreads far beyond the laboratory. The way people construct meaning in culture, the humanities, and especially language, is affected. If science, long considered the most rigorous path to truth, is unstable, then the very structure of how humans communicate and understand knowledge begins to wobble too. The humanities have always lived with ambiguity. Fields like philosophy, literature, and history often deal in interpretation rather than measurement. Yet even these disciplines rest on shared assumptions about evidence, coherence, and meaning. If scientific methods no longer offer firm ground, then the idea of objective knowledge—once taken for granted even when critiqued—becomes more suspect. Interpretive disciplines may further embrace relativism, not out of conviction, but because the ideal of shared truth has become harder to defend. Language, already seen as a filter for reality, becomes even more opaque. Terms like 'truth' or 'evidence' start to feel provisional, contingent, or even obsolete. Culturally, this creates a deep shift. For over a century, science has been associated with progress. Its methods seemed reliable, its findings stable. That confidence is eroding. If statistical tests can be manipulated, if published results are frequently wrong, then knowledge itself seems fragile. Public trust disintegrates with it. The notion that science can guide policy, heal illness, or explain the natural world begins to weaken. As belief in scientific objectivity fades, people turn toward personal beliefs, ideology, or tribal identities. This shift breeds populism, scepticism, and division, as groups no longer agree on what constitutes a fact. Language sits at the centre of this crisis. It is the vehicle through which knowledge is shared, tested, and debated. But language depends on shared meanings. When the institutions that anchor those meanings falter, language itself becomes unstable. Words like 'data', 'proof', or 'scientific' no longer carry the same weight. They become contested, co-opted, or emptied out. In political and social debates, this leads to chaos. Competing narratives clash, not just over values, but over basic definitions. Language loses its grounding. This fragility leads to increased manipulation. If words are unmoored, they can be used more easily to deceive or persuade. The epistemological crisis in science thus opens the door to a crisis of rhetoric. Language becomes a tool of control rather than understanding. Trust breaks down. Dialogue becomes harder. The boundaries between truth and opinion blur. The epistemological problem in science has broader consequences. If knowledge cannot be trusted, then neither can the

language used to express it. This demands a new kind of vigilance—not only about methods or data, but about the words used to claim truth. Language must be re-examined, not as a neutral medium, but as a force that shapes, distorts, or preserves what humans believe they know.

Great betrayal of science

In 'The Great Betrayal: Fraud in Science[108]', Horace Freeland Judson draws attention to an uncomfortable truth: fraud in science is not a recent or rare phenomenon, but a long-standing and growing issue. He begins by reminding us that errors and abnormalities have long aided discovery. William Harvey learnt how the heart functions by observing abnormal rhythms in dying animals. The study of genetic defects became central to understanding the human genome. Scientists have often used what is broken to understand what is whole. But fraud, unlike natural defects, is not an accidental disruption. It is a betrayal of the process itself. Judson argues that scientific misconduct—fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism—is both more widespread and more damaging than institutions admit. Whistleblowers who call out misconduct are often punished, not rewarded. Meanwhile, the systems meant to prevent fraud, like peer review, are weakened by conflicts of interest, overproduction, and institutional pressures. The sheer volume of published studies makes it hard to separate truth from noise, and even harder to correct errors once they are embedded in the literature. Science is often presented as self-correcting. But Judson shows that the structures meant to safeguard it—editorial boards, reviewers, professional codes—are under strain. Electronic publishing, which once promised openness and access, also enabled faster and looser dissemination of unchecked work. Mentorship, once a vital ethical anchor, has declined. Younger researchers are often left to navigate an increasingly competitive system alone, vulnerable to the temptation to publish quickly or manipulate data. The decay is not isolated to science. Judson links it to a wider culture of dishonesty. The 1990s saw financial disasters—Enron, WorldCom, and Tyco—reveal deep corruption in corporate America. Even auditing firms like Arthur Andersen collapsed under the weight of their complicity. The collapse was not just financial; it was ethical. From business to science, Judson sees a society struggling to maintain moral integrity under the weight of competition, greed, and performance metrics. He also traces the typology of scientific fraud back to Charles Babbage, who identified categories like hoaxing, forging, trimming, and cooking. These practices—ranging from outright invention of data to selective presentation—are still familiar. Even revered scientists like Newton, Mendel, and Millikan have been accused of cutting corners. The question, then and now, is whether the ends justify the means. Do we forgive fraud when the result proves true? Judson warns that such rationalisations weaken the moral fabric of science. What complicates this even more is the increasing reliance on technical innovation. Breakthrough methods often precede breakthroughs in knowledge. Yet rapid innovation also makes replication harder. Limited funding for reproducibility studies, especially in complex fields like biology, means that fraudulent results can remain unchallenged for years. The incentives to publish, to win grants, and to impress peers are stronger than the incentives to be cautious, honest, or rigorous. Fraud, Judson insists, is not an aberration. It is a defect that reveals what science has become—an enterprise caught between its noble ideals and the pressures of modern systems. The integrity of science rests not just on individual honesty, but on the environments in which scientists work. Unless those environments reward ethical behaviour and prioritise quality over quantity, misconduct will persist. Judson's message is not cynical but urgent. Science is one of the few human pursuits that can truly transform lives. But

[108] Judson, H.F. (2004) The Great Betrayal: Fraud in Science. Harcourt.

it must be protected from the erosion of its principles. Fraud is not only a betrayal of science. It is a destruction of the future it promises.

Problems of peer review

In the book 'Science, Truth, and Democracy[109]', Philip Kitcher emphasises that scientific inquiry should remain free from external pressures—moral, political, or religious—especially when shaping research or evaluating evidence. However, as Richard Smith argues, the peer review process, central to scientific validation, is riddled with flaws. It is slow, expensive, inconsistent, and susceptible to bias. Despite these weaknesses, peer review has become deeply embedded in the identity of modern science. After World War II, publication became the defining marker of scientific legitimacy. Once published, research enters a communal process of evaluation, extension, and correction. Yet this ideal rarely matches reality. Peer review today faces increasing scrutiny. At the Second International Congress on Peer Review in 1993, Drummond Rennie highlighted a core contradiction: the best reviewers are often competitors of those whose work they assess. This conflict of interest has grown sharper in a world where grants, tenure, and reputations hinge on publications. The system encourages researchers to favour results that are sensational or trendy, while more cautious, complex work struggles to gain recognition. Another issue is inconsistency. The expansion of scientific journals has led to a fragmented landscape where standards vary widely. A paper rejected by one journal may be accepted by another with minimal changes. This variability undermines the idea that peer review is a robust filter for quality. Instead, it often functions more as a gatekeeping ritual that reinforces prestige hierarchies. Anonymity is another source of contention. Traditional peer review is usually blind, with reviewers remaining anonymous. Advocates say this encourages honesty. Critics argue it promotes irresponsibility. Fiona Godlee, Richard Smith, and Rennie have pushed for open reviewing, where identities are known and comments are made public. At the 'BMJ', experiments with open peer review found no decrease in quality. In fact, transparency made reviewers more thoughtful and accountable. This shift signals a broader transformation. Open peer review is part of a movement toward reforming scientific publishing. New models challenge the idea that peer review should be the sole arbiter of validity. Platforms now exist where preprints are made public and reviewed post-publication by the wider community. While such systems are still evolving, they offer a glimpse of what a more transparent and inclusive scientific culture might look like. Yet reform is not simple. As the number of researchers and papers grows, the burden on reviewers becomes unsustainable. Many scientists, especially early-career ones, feel pressured to review for free, often with little recognition. Meanwhile, senior academics are overwhelmed by requests. This imbalance fuels delays and contributes to the uneven quality of reviews. The peer review system is not beyond repair, but its flaws can no longer be ignored. Greater openness, better incentives, and clearer standards are needed. The goal is not to abandon judgment but to refine it—ensuring that review serves science rather than distorting it.

Why most published research findings are false

In 'Why Most Published Research Findings Are False[110]' John Ioannidis argues that a large portion of published research may not reflect real discoveries but false findings. In his widely discussed article, he explains how statistical methods, structural biases, and systemic

[109] Kitcher, P. (2001) Science, Truth, and Democracy. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[110] Ioannidis, J.P.A. (2005) 'Why Most Published Research Findings Are False', PLoS Medicine, 2(8), e124.

pressures combine to distort scientific truth. His claim is not that researchers are dishonest, but that the systems in which they work often produce unreliable results. One of the core problems is the misuse of statistical significance. The common threshold of $p < 0.05$, originally intended as a rule of thumb, has become a rigid standard. Researchers often manipulate their data or analysis until they achieve this value. This practice, sometimes called 'p-hacking', increases the likelihood of false positives. A statistically significant result might look convincing on the surface, but it often does not reflect a real effect, especially when study designs are weak or underpowered. Ioannidis emphasises that studies with small sample sizes are particularly vulnerable. Small studies produce more variable results, which means a significant result might be due to chance. In fields where many hypotheses are tested without strong prior evidence, the chance of finding something that is both significant and true is even lower. The result is a research landscape filled with claims that are unlikely to hold up under scrutiny. Bias adds another layer to the problem. It can take many forms—publication bias, selective reporting, and financial conflicts of interest. Journals often prefer positive findings, which means studies with null results are less likely to be published. Researchers, under pressure to publish, may consciously or unconsciously report their results in a way that favours a particular outcome. These patterns distort the scientific literature and create a misleading picture of progress. The overall result is discouraging. When statistical thresholds are misused, when biases are widespread, and when studies are underpowered or poorly designed, it becomes more likely that research findings are false. Even in rigorous fields, the pressure to produce new results can outpace the slow, careful process of scientific validation. Ioannidis proposes a change in how research is evaluated. Rather than relying so heavily on statistical significance, the focus should shift to study design, prior probabilities, replication, and transparency. Larger, well-powered studies with pre-registered methods and open data are more likely to produce trustworthy results. The scientific community needs to resist the lure of novelty and prioritise results that are reproducible and robust. The implications of his work go beyond statistics. It challenges how science is funded, published, and rewarded. When the system values quantity over quality, false findings become inevitable. A deeper cultural shift is needed—one that values careful work over quick results, and truth over appearances.

Overproduction of scientists

In 1927, just twenty-nine scientists attended the legendary Fifth Solvay Conference in Brussels. Among them were the great architects of modern physics—Einstein, Bohr, Schrödinger, Heisenberg, Curie, Planck—seventeen Nobel laureates in one photo. These were not just participants but pioneers, whose ideas shattered classical physics and shaped our understanding of the universe. The image of that conference has become iconic: an elite gathering of minds confronting the fundamental nature of reality. Today, that image seems almost quaint. Science has expanded beyond recognition. Modern scientific congresses host tens of thousands, from chemistry and physics to neuroscience and medicine, transforming elite discussion into mass participation. The American Physical Society draws 10,000 attendees per event; medical conferences can top 50,000. Science, once an artisanal craft, has become a global industry. This exponential growth has produced impressive results—but also raised serious concerns. Gianfranco Pacchioni's provocative question, 'Are we too many?' is not just rhetorical. With more than 10 million active researchers worldwide, science is overproducing not just studies but data, theories, and interpretations at a scale few can follow. Between 1996 and 2011 alone, over twenty-five million scientific articles were published. The result is not just a wealth of knowledge—but a flood. Fundamental science, once led by a few brilliant minds tackling grand questions, now risks being buried under a mountain of marginal findings, minor

variations, and hyper-specialised micro-studies. The scientific image of the world, instead of simplifying reality, is growing ever more fragmented and abstract. More scientists mean more publications, more jargon, more models, more complexity—until the very clarity science once promised gives way to a fog of competing interpretations. As Pacchioni notes, science is not like plumbing when a discovery is made in Seoul, it need not be repeated in São Paulo. Yet global competition and publication pressure lead thousands to pursue the same questions, replicate similar studies, and generate data with diminishing novelty or significance. The problem is not simply quantity, but quality and direction. The overproduction of truth, as Pacchioni calls it, fragments effort and erodes coherence. Talent is diluted, attention is scattered, and important questions risk being drowned in noise. While the growth of engineers, technicians, and applied scientists may reflect our technological world, fundamental science requires more than numbers—it needs originality, insight, and purpose. Today's challenge is not just producing knowledge, but deciding what knowledge matters, and who gets to pursue it. In an era of unprecedented scientific output, where millions of researchers contribute to an ever-expanding archive of studies, the question is no longer whether we can produce knowledge, but whether we can discern its relevance. The system rewards quantity, novelty, and specialisation—even when the outcome is trivial, redundant, or disconnected from meaningful inquiry. Science has become so institutionalised, so entwined with career advancement and funding cycles, that few dare to question the actual value of their work. But how long can this continue before someone finally stands up and says what everyone quietly suspects? Who will be the first to declare, 'I hold a sinecure position. I know that my research is non-essential[111]'? Until then, the machinery will keep turning—producing truths, half-truths, and unread footnotes—while the essential question remains unasked: not just what science can do, but what it should be for.

5. HERMENEUTICS

5.1. Hermeneutics

(The endless dialogue: The hermeneutic condition of language)

'Understanding is not a reproductive activity but a productive one'.

— Friedrich Schleiermacher, Hermeneutics and Criticism

'Texts are not things to be deciphered but voices to be heard'.

— Jean Grondin, Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the practice and theory of interpretation, originally rooted in reading sacred texts, but now extended to many areas of human understanding. The word comes from the Greek hermēneuein, meaning to interpret or translate, and is associated with hermeneus, a translator. Some trace its origins even deeper, to pre-Greek roots. The earliest philosophical use appears in Aristotle's 'On Interpretation', where he explored how words can represent thoughts

[111] This applies to the author of this book.

and how logic depends on the form of language. From its beginning, hermeneutics has dealt with the question of how language expresses, distorts, or reveals meaning. The myth of Hermes, the messenger god, casts a long shadow over the discipline. Hermes communicated divine messages to mortals but also misled and deceived. This image captures a core ambiguity in language—it can guide or misguide, clarify, or confuse. Socrates noted the dual nature of words: they can lead to truth, but also to falsehood. This is why interpretation needs discipline. Hermeneutics arose as an effort to read not only what texts say, but what they might mean beneath their surface, especially when meanings are unclear, contradictory, or hidden. Historically, hermeneutics developed alongside religious traditions. In Mesopotamia, scribes interpreted myths and rituals to decode divine intent. Jewish scholars, such as those following Hillel, developed complex principles to reconcile the layers of meaning in the Torah. The Islamic tradition, particularly in Quranic studies, created detailed systems to understand language, resolve tensions, and apply moral law. In India, the Mimamsa school analysed the Vedas with precision, aiming to understand the moral and ritual duties encoded in the texts. Buddhist interpretation, meanwhile, sought to distinguish absolute truth from conventional speech, helping practitioners move toward enlightenment. In Christianity, interpretation deepened through thinkers like Augustine, who argued in 'De Doctrina Christiana' that humility and love were essential to reading scripture properly. Biblical hermeneutics expanded into a fourfold method—literal, moral, allegorical, and anagogical. Each layer offered a different path to meaning, connecting surface narrative with hidden spiritual insight. With the rise of modern humanism, interpretation moved beyond theology. In the 15th century, Lorenzo Valla used hermeneutics to expose the forgery of the 'Donation of Constantine'. This marked a shift from religious to historical-critical methods. Later, Friedrich Schleiermacher proposed that understanding texts involves both grammatical analysis and psychological empathy. To interpret is to understand another mind through their words. In the 20th century, Heidegger and Gadamer expanded hermeneutics into a broader philosophy of being and understanding. Interpretation became circular—each reading shapes and is shaped by the reader's assumptions. This hermeneutic circle, far from being a flaw, was seen as the necessary structure of all understanding. Language, in this view, is not a mirror of thought but a world we inhabit. Hermeneutics now includes voices from across philosophy, from Ricoeur's narrative theory to Derrida's deconstruction. Despite their differences, they all respond to a basic challenge: how to make sense of meaning when language is both our tool and our obstacle.

On interpretation

Aristotle's 'On Interpretation' is one of the first works to study how language and logic are connected. It begins by looking at simple propositions—statements that are either true or false. Aristotle examines the structure of language and how words can represent thoughts. Though the sounds of words vary between languages, the mental ideas behind them are the same. This view allows language to function as a symbolic system where words point to shared human experiences. He draws a distinction between nouns and verbs. Nouns refer to subjects without indicating time. Verbs, by contrast, imply time and action. Sentences only make sense, Aristotle says, when they combine words into affirmations or negations. A sentence is not just a string of words; it carries a claim about the world. He shows how logic depends on this structure. Statements can affirm or deny something, and each has a logical counterpart. This structure forms what is now known as the square of opposition. It helps to categorise propositions based on whether they are universal or, affirmative or negative. One of the more famous parts of the text deals with future contingents. Aristotle poses a question: if there will or will not be a sea battle tomorrow, is it already true or false today? If the answer is yes, then

the future seems fixed and necessary. But if it is not already determined, then the law of excluded middle—the idea that something must either be true or false—does not apply. This problem introduces uncertainty into logic and has had lasting influence on debates about time, chance, and prediction. Later thinkers extended Aristotle's symbolic approach. Boethius, writing in late antiquity, gave this idea a more emotional depth. In 'On the Consolation of Philosophy', he uses language not just to argue, but to reflect and mourn. Though his work is about fate, suffering, and divine order, it follows the same idea that language gives shape to inner thought. Boethius helped bridge classical logic with medieval spiritual inquiry, showing that reason and emotion can be expressed through the same symbolic system of language. In modern times, especially in postmodern theory, this whole approach has been challenged. Thinkers like Derrida question whether words ever truly refer to fixed meanings. Meaning, they argue, always shifts. The idea that language can clearly mirror thought or truth is, to them, a comforting illusion. Yet even these critiques still work within the tradition Aristotle helped define. Postmodernism did not abandon interpretation; it multiplied its layers. Where Aristotle tried to fix the link between word and meaning, later thinkers exposed its instability. Still, the problem of how to understand language remains central. Whether one believes in stable meanings or endless interpretations, the need to interpret never disappears. From Aristotle's early logic to Boethius' symbolic language of grief, to postmodern scepticism, the act of interpreting language links all these moments in thought.

Linguistics

Hermeneutics and linguistics share a common interest in the meaning of language. While hermeneutics is concerned with interpretation—particularly of texts—linguistics provides the formal tools to understand how language works. The two fields support one another. Hermeneutics asks what a text means, and linguistics helps explain how meaning is formed through structure, context, and use. Syntax, semantics, and pragmatics offer lenses through which language can be broken down and examined, making interpretation more precise. Without this linguistic foundation, interpretation would be guesswork, unanchored from the rules that govern language behaviour. This connection was already visible in Aristotle's early reflections on language. He understood words as signs of mental experiences, noting that even if languages differ in sound, they share the same logical principles. This observation still resonates today. Understanding meaning involves more than decoding words—it means grasping how language reflects, shapes, and limits human thought. Philology, the historical study of language and texts, adds another layer to this relationship. It shows how language evolves and how meaning shifts over time. Philologists trace the changes in vocabulary, grammar, and usage that influence how a text might have been understood in its original context. This is particularly important in interpreting ancient or religious texts. A single word may have carried different meanings at different moments in history. The philological method grounds interpretation in historical evidence, revealing how texts functioned within their cultural setting. In doing so, philology supports the hermeneutic idea that meaning is not fixed but arises from an ongoing dialogue between the past and present. Literature, meanwhile, puts this interplay into motion. Literary texts are rarely straightforward. They use metaphor, ambiguity, rhythm, and tone to create meanings that exceed literal language. Hermeneutics, when applied to literature, helps uncover these layers. It asks how a story reflects identity, emotion, and ideology. It also considers how different readers might interpret the same text in different ways. In this way, literature becomes a testing ground for hermeneutic theories. Reading a poem or novel is not just about understanding words; it is about hearing the echoes of culture, history, and human emotion within them. Together, linguistics, philology, and

literature show that interpretation is not a single act but a process that moves between structure, history, and imagination. Language is never neutral. It carries the traces of time and the intentions of those who use it. Hermeneutics, then, is not only about finding meaning but also about understanding how meaning is made and remade in every act of communication.

Schleiermacher's hermeneutics

Friedrich Schleiermacher[112] transformed hermeneutics from a technical method into a philosophical theory of understanding. Before him, interpretation was confined to specific fields like theology or classical philology. Hermeneutics was mostly a tool used only when a text seemed unclear. Schleiermacher's aim was different. He wanted to establish a universal theory that applied to all acts of understanding—spoken or written, sacred or secular. This ambition marked a turning point. Later thinkers saw it as a major break with the past, the moment when hermeneutics became a general discipline. The challenge with Schleiermacher's work is that it survives in fragments. Between 1805 and 1833, he gave several lectures on hermeneutics, but only partial notes remain. These lectures help trace how Schleiermacher's thinking developed over time. Earlier theories relied on fixed principles, often rooted in religion or logic. Schleiermacher rejected that foundation. He argued that understanding is not something automatic. Misunderstanding is the norm, and real understanding is something one must work toward. He focused on the gap between interpreter and text, between one mind and another. This gap can never fully disappear. It must be bridged, moment by moment, through interpretation. For Schleiermacher, language is central. All thought is shaped by language. You cannot think clearly without words. At the same time, individuals personalise language, bending it to express unique ideas. Hermeneutics, then, must work between two limits: the shared rules of language and the private meanings of an individual speaker. The process is never fixed. It always shifts between general and between structure and intuition. He divided hermeneutics into two parts. Grammatical interpretation looks at language and its rules. Psychological interpretation tries to enter the mind of the author. Both are necessary. Words must be understood both in context and in relation to the inner world of their creator. Schleiermacher also emphasised the hermeneutic circle: one must understand the whole to grasp the parts, but the parts must be known to understand the whole. This circular motion is not a flaw. It is the natural rhythm of understanding. One of his most famous, and controversial, claims is that the interpreter should understand the author better than the author understood himself. This does not mean outsmarting the author. It means grasping the deeper unity between language and thought that may not have been clear even to the one who first wrote the text. Schleiermacher's hermeneutics is not about fixed rules. It is a reflective practice, grounded in language, aimed at bridging the gap between people. It remains a foundation for modern theories of interpretation.

Hermeneutics and historicism

Schleiermacher's hermeneutics reshaped how historians think about understanding. His emphasis on the individuality of the text and the interplay between parts and whole became a model for German historiography. Hermeneutics reshaped how historical understanding was conceived, emphasizing the individuality of each text and the interplay between parts and whole as a model for interpreting the past. Historical events came to be seen as gaining meaning only in relation to larger processes, just as sentences derive meaning from their place in a complete work. Testimonies and fragments of the past were no longer inert facts but signs to be interpreted within a broader context. Philological training encouraged historians to approach

[112] Schleiermacher, F. (1959) Hermeneutik: Nach den Handschriften, edited by H. Kimmerle, Heidelberg.

the past with precision and without imposing present-day prejudices, seeking to understand each era on its own terms as something complete in itself. Philology was understood not merely as the study of texts but as a key to human culture, re-engaging with what had already been expressed—most fully in language. To study language was to study the human spirit, and so history and philology became parallel pursuits aimed at uncovering human meaning as preserved in language, thought, and culture. Interpretation in this sense was multi-dimensional, combining grammatical, psychological, historical, and literary perspectives. This link between hermeneutics and historicism gave rise to methods that traced the unity of history without forcing it into rigid philosophical systems, while also insisting on disciplined research, critical evaluation, and contextual interpretation. The move from theological certainty to historical inquiry marked a shift in how truth was understood. Instead of being given, truth had to be interpreted, and interpretation was never complete. History, like language, was a field of signs pointing beyond themselves.

Philosophical hermeneutics

Wilhelm Dilthey[113] remains an underappreciated thinker, partly because his central contributions—including 'Introduction to the Sciences of the Spirit' and 'The Construction of the Historical World'—have not been widely accessible. Even in Germany and the United States, efforts to publish and systematise his writings are recent. The delay reflects the complexity and breadth of his work, rather than any national oversight. Dilthey has been called 'the philosopher of historicism'. This is accurate if one understands historicism as the belief that self-understanding depends on grasping the historical forces that shape human life. Dilthey's philosophical goal was to respond to the new sense of historical consciousness that had emerged in the modern era. This required redefining philosophy as a discipline rooted in the interpretation of lived experience. Historicity, for Dilthey, was not just the fact of something having happened in the past—it was a layered concept involving the singularity of events, the rational progression of history, and the deep connection between past and present through tradition. Dilthey's understanding of philosophy moves away from Hegel’s speculative idealism. While Hegel viewed history as a rational process guided by the Absolute Spirit, culminating in the philosopher’s realisation of universal truth, Dilthey viewed such claims with suspicion. He argued that philosophy, far from being a final knowledge, always comes late. It reflects on what has already occurred. It does not produce truths from pure thought but analyses life, which cannot itself be reduced to intellectual categories. Life, for Dilthey, is the ultimate ground of all philosophy—immediate, experienced, and opaque to full explanation. Philosophy, then, is a form of self-reflection—what Dilthey called Selbstbesinnung. This concept has no fixed definition in his work but recurs in various forms. It suggests a reflective awareness of life, not an abstract system. Philosophy observes the structures already present in human experience, feelings, and representations. Because of this, philosophy cannot be presuppositionless. It cannot invent its own foundations because those foundations are always found in life itself, which lies beyond the reach of full conceptualisation. Unlike Hegel, Dilthey did not see philosophy as the climax of history, but as a tool for understanding the human world. He emphasised that the humanities—the sciences of man, society, and history—hold the key to self-understanding. These disciplines interpret the symbolic forms through which life expresses itself. In this sense, philosophy becomes a way to mediate between human experiences and general knowledge. It reflects an impulse in consciousness to rise above the accidental and to form meaning through cultural and historical interpretation. Dilthey’s philosophical

[113] Ricoeur, P. (1981) Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

hermeneutics thus offers a powerful alternative to metaphysical systems. It roots understanding in the lived and historical character of human existence, affirming that all knowledge is shaped by life's irreducible complexity and temporal depth.

Hermeneutics and ontology

Martin Heidegger transformed the scope of hermeneutics by linking it directly to ontology. He broke with the older view of interpretation as a secondary, text-bound method, and argued instead that understanding is a basic structure of human existence. This shift removed hermeneutics from the narrow frame of scholarly technique and placed it within the broader context of how humans encounter the world. Understanding, for Heidegger, is not something humans do—it is what humans are. From this perspective, interpretation is not a tool of the humanities but a condition of being. Heidegger's early writings followed the anti-psychologism of German philosophy. In his studies on logic and language, he emphasised that meaning is not just psychological but belongs to another order of reality. This led him to question how meaning connects to objects in the world. Over time, especially after World War I, his focus turned to life itself as the foundation of meaning. Influenced by Dilthey, he argued that life is not a series of mental states but a movement through meaningful situations. Historicity—life's embeddedness in time—became central to his idea of understanding. Heidegger's lectures from 1919 onward began shaping what he would later call 'hermeneutics of facticity'. Here, understanding is no longer about method; it becomes a way of being in the world. To understand something is to live through it, to project oneself toward a possibility within one's concrete situation. This 'thrownness', the condition of finding oneself already in the world, limits and shapes all understanding. It also means that understanding cannot be fully objectified. Attempts to make it into a scientific method, detached from the life of the subject, erase what is most essential—its origin in existence. Heidegger's major work, 'Being and Time[114]', pushed this view further. He argued that understanding operates through a circular movement. One always begins from a pre-understanding shaped by history, language, and culture. Rather than escaping this circle, one must enter it properly. The structure of this movement is not logical but existential. It reflects the way human beings are always already involved in the world. In his later philosophy, Heidegger deepened his inquiry into language. He made a distinction between speaking and saying. Speaking is tied to human expression, but saying reveals being itself. Language, in this view, is not something humans can control; it is something that speaks through them. 'Language is the house of Being', he wrote, suggesting that the essence of existence is disclosed through the word. Poetry, rather than logic, became the model for this kind of saying since it allows truth to emerge without domination or objectification. In the end, Heidegger redefined hermeneutics as the very way humans exist—always interpreting, always situated in history, always addressed by Being. This ontological turn gave hermeneutics a universal role: not just as a theory of interpretation but as the foundation for any attempt to understand meaning at all.

Gadamer on history

Hans-Georg Gadamer's reflections on history are inseparable from the hermeneutical project developed in 'Truth and Method[115]'. Although he is not traditionally classified as a philosopher of history, his work positions historical experience at the centre of philosophical understanding. For Gadamer, history is not an object to be observed from a distance but the

[114] Heidegger, M. (1927) Being and Time. Trans. Macquarrie, J. and Robinson, E. Harper & Row.
[115] Gadamer, H.-G. (2004) Truth and Method. London: Continuum.

very medium in which thought is shaped. Human beings are historically constituted; interpretation is never free from temporal context. This challenges the Enlightenment ideal of objectivity, which seeks to eliminate bias and achieve certainty through detached observation. In contrast, Gadamer argues that understanding is always situated. One's relationship with the past is not neutral but participatory. He rejects the idea that historical knowledge can mirror the methods of the natural sciences. The attempt to treat history as a science, governed by strict methodology and causal laws, misunderstands its nature. Human actions are not predictable forces but contingent and intentional. Causality in history is not mechanical but interpretative. Meaning emerges not from fixed causes but from the retrospective understanding of lived experience. History cannot be reduced to chronology or general laws because the interpreter brings their own historical position to every act of understanding. Gadamer views this embeddedness not as a limitation but as a condition of possibility. Prejudices—understood not as biases but as pre-judgments—are the starting points for interpretation. Rather than eliminating them, hermeneutics calls for critical awareness of their influence. The goal is not objective detachment but dialogical engagement with tradition. Understanding unfolds through a fusion of horizons, where the perspective of the interpreter and the historical text meet and inform each other. Language, in Gadamer's view, is central to this process. It is not simply a tool for conveying thought but the medium in which meaning takes shape. Interpretation is always linguistic, and language itself has a history. It is both inherited and evolving. This makes hermeneutics fundamentally historical since each act of understanding is shaped by a linguistic world already in place. The meaning of a text cannot be fixed because language, like history, is always in motion. Gadamer's approach is not relativistic but responsive. He does not claim that anything can mean anything, but that understanding is always conditioned by the interpreter's historical position. Truth, in the humanities, is not universal and timeless but context-dependent and shaped by experience. It requires sensitivity, judgment, and participation in a shared tradition. There is no final interpretation, only a deepening dialogue with the past. This conception opposes both scientistic historicism and metaphysical absolutism. It affirms that the human relationship with history is lived, not abstract. Historical knowledge is not the neutral collection of facts but an encounter with meaning shaped by time, language, and culture. What people come to know through history is not just the past but themselves. Gadamer's philosophy challenges the ideal of detached reason and restores interpretation to its rightful place: within the ongoing and unfinished process of human understanding. In doing so, he offers a hermeneutics of finitude, grounded not in certainty, but in dialogue, tradition, and historical being. His insight is that the past is never simply behind us—it continues to speak, and people understand it only by listening from where they stand.

Dynamic nature of the scripture

The traditional view of writing, especially in its nonphonetic forms like mathematical notation, often assumes that meaning exists beyond the moment of expression. These signs appear to point toward timeless truths, abstract and disconnected from history. They suggest that understanding lies in an ideal realm, far from the living act of speaking or reading. In contrast, phonetic writing challenges this idea. It ties meaning to sound, time, and context. The written word, when tied to speech, is always part of a moment—it participates in the here and now. This shift reveals that meaning is not a distant essence but something that unfolds in time, through speech and interpretation. Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics[116] emphasises this

[116] Gadamer, H.-G. (2010) in Kearney, R. and Zimmermann, J. (eds) Scripture and Hermeneutics: Exploring the Boundaries. London: Routledge.

temporal dimension of meaning. For him, understanding is not about extracting eternal truths from fixed forms. It is about entering a historical event, a living encounter with language. When he speaks of the Word becoming flesh, he refers to the idea that meaning is no longer detached or purely spiritual. Instead, it enters the world. It becomes human, finite, yet no less profound. In this way, language is not a tool we apply but a process we participate in. Each time we speak or write, we are not just using words—we are creating meaning. Finding the right word is not a mechanical choice. It is an act of discovery, where the speaker or writer feels out the right expression in the context of a specific moment. This process is speculative. Words are not only signs that point to meaning; they are more like images that reflect what they signify. Like a reflection in a mirror, the word captures the thing and shows it anew. It contains both its form and its meaning, allowing interpretation without losing its connection to the original sense. Interpretation, then, is never a repetition. It is always a renewal, shaped by time and the reader's position within it. The same applies to the idea of the classic. Traditionally, the classic was seen as timeless. But after the eighteenth century, writers like Samuel Johnson and thinkers like Hegel began to see it differently. The classic became something from the past, a relic that needs to be revived and reinterpreted. Each generation reclaims it differently, reshaping its meaning according to new needs. The classic survives not by staying the same, but by allowing itself to change. This dynamic applies especially when a classic takes on the weight of Scripture. A text that functions as Scripture does not just sit on a shelf. It speaks to the reader. It offers not only historical insight but personal relevance. Critics have debated whether such texts should be treated as sacred or open to critique like any other writing. Gadamer suggests that every act of understanding is a fusion of the past and the present. The meaning of Scripture—or any classic—arises not from its fixed origin but from the ongoing relationship between the text and its readers. In this way, Scripture and classic texts are both dynamic. They are not just read; they are lived. Meaning is not fixed in them, but always in motion, unfolding through speech, interpretation, and history.

Language and meaning

Hermeneutics begins with the effort to understand meaning—how it is formed, expressed, and interpreted. While traditionally focused on written texts, hermeneutics today includes the interpretation of other symbolic forms such as gestures, images, rituals, and artworks. These, too, are bound to language, since even nonverbal signs often find their meaning through words. In his chapter[117] from 'The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics', Daniel Dahlstrom outlines how modern hermeneutics approaches language and meaning by drawing primarily on German thinkers like Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer, while occasionally contrasting their views with Anglo-American perspectives. Communication involves more than just speaking. It depends on a structure where four elements interact: the speaker, the message, the meaning, and the listener. This structure, which Dahlstrom calls the 'hermeneutical quadrangle', illustrates how understanding happens through a network of relations. Words, gestures, or images serve as markers. These markers are then interpreted to grasp the intended meaning, but that meaning is rarely limited to the speaker's intent. Instead, meaning emerges from the entire situation: who is speaking, how they are saying it, who is listening, and under what circumstances. Even in simple conversations, meaning can break down. Misunderstandings are common not only because language is ambiguous but because the interpreter always brings their own assumptions and history into the process. Communication is fragile. Listeners may

[117] Dahlstrom, D. (2014) 'Language and Meaning', in Malpas, J. and Gander, H.-H. (eds) The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics. London: Routledge.

miss the point or misunderstand entirely, and speakers may not fully know what they intend to express. Words carry layers of meaning that shift with time, setting, and social context. Technical fields like law or science, for example, develop their own vocabularies, shaped by centuries of tradition. The interpreter must unpack these layers. Interpretation, then, is the act of uncovering what a linguistic expression means in a specific context. Consider a mother trying to understand her baby's cry. The cry might signal hunger, discomfort, or fear. She interprets it based not just on sound, but on a shared background of bodily cues, timing, and experience. This process is grounded in prior understanding—something already known that must now be made clear. It is also shaped by the interpreter's assumptions. These preconceptions form what hermeneutics calls the 'hermeneutical situation'. In this view, meaning is never just what the author meant. A text, once spoken or written, takes on a life beyond the author's intent. Schleiermacher emphasised reconstructing the individual's thought, while Gadamer stressed how meanings evolve over time through dialogue with tradition. The goal is not just to retrieve a message, but to participate in its development. The ideal of hermeneutics is to grasp meaning as it arises through language, in the interplay between universal linguistic forms and individual expression. Language is not static. It changes with its users and is reshaped through interpretation. Hermeneutics shows that understanding is not about fixing meaning but about engaging with it—listening, questioning, and reinterpreting as part of an ongoing human dialogue.

5.2. Interpretation

(Unfolding meaning: The hermeneutics of communication)

'Interpretation is not the application of a method but the unfolding of a relation'.

— Paul Ricoeur, The Conflict of Interpretations

Language philosophy

Hermeneutics, the philosophy of interpretation, is not exclusive to continental traditions. It has clear connections with analytic philosophy, especially through its reflections on language. One of the most important figures bridging these traditions is Ludwig Wittgenstein. His contributions reshaped how language, meaning, and understanding are viewed within philosophy. In 'The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics', Lee Braver[118] explores how Wittgenstein's thought intersects with the core concerns of hermeneutics, especially regarding the interpretative nature of language. In his early work, 'Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus', Wittgenstein proposed that language mirrors reality. Sentences were understood as logical pictures of facts. Words, or names, pointed to simple, indivisible objects. The arrangement of these names in a proposition created a picture that either matched the world or did not. This model of language emphasised precision and logical form. It was based on the idea that meaning results from a clear, objective link between signs and the world. But Wittgenstein later abandoned this view. In 'Philosophical Investigations', he argued that language does not work through direct reference alone. The meaning of a word is not simply tied to what it names. Instead, meaning is found in how words are used—in their function within shared forms of life. He introduced the concept of 'language-games' to show that language operates within flexible,

[118] Braver, L. (2014) 'Hermeneutics and Language Philosophy', in Malpas, J. and Gander, H.-H. (eds) The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics. London: Routledge.

rule-governed activities. These games are not private or abstract but embedded in public, social behaviour. Naming, understanding, and rule-following are all part of these games, and none are purely mechanical. Even pointing to an object depends on prior training, expectations, and interpretation. Understanding language, then, is not about decoding fixed meanings but navigating through a context of shared practices. When someone speaks, the listener must interpret not only the words but also their tone, timing, and social situation. A rule, once stated, does not carry its own interpretation—it must be applied, and the way it is applied can vary. There is no private language because any use of signs must be publicly learnable and communally understood. This emphasis on public practice turns language into a living, dynamic activity rather than a static code. Wittgenstein's later work dismantles the idea of perfect clarity in language. Instead, it reveals language as open-ended, shaped by culture, habit, and use. Every expression is potentially ambiguous. No sentence guarantees a single, fixed interpretation. This realisation brings him close to the concerns of hermeneutics, which also sees interpretation as central to understanding. Language is not transparent; it requires participation, reflection, and a constant back-and-forth between speaker and listener. In this light, hermeneutics and analytic philosophy converge on a shared insight: meaning is never just given but always developed through interpretation. Braver shows how Wittgenstein's philosophy helps uncover the interpretative foundations of even the most ordinary forms of communication. Language becomes a process, not a product—a space where understanding is never final but always negotiated.

'Fusion of horizons'

Nicholas Davey[119], in 'The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics', examines how hermeneutics interacts with structuralism and post-structuralism, especially through the lens of Paul Ricoeur's idea of 'Structure, Word and Event'. This triad shows the tension between three views of language: as a formal system, as a bearer of meaning, and as a lived event. Structuralism tends to prioritise the system. Saussure's idea of langue—language as structure—takes precedence over parole, or actual speech. Hermeneutic thinkers like Heidegger and Gadamer argue the opposite. For them, ordinary language use—what Heidegger calls Sprache—is not secondary but foundational. It reveals the world and cannot be reduced to a static code. Structuralism avoids subjectivity by focusing on the internal relations of signs. It draws on Nietzsche's suspicion of fixed essence and identity. But hermeneutics insists that meaning happens in lived experience. Language is not a neutral carrier of truth. It performs, reveals, and transforms. Meaning does not sit passively in a text but comes alive in interpretation. This brings us to the question of truth. For structuralism, truth can be found in the regularities of sign systems. For hermeneutics, truth is less about correspondence and more about disclosure. It appears in the moment of understanding, always shaped by history and context. Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Heidegger suggest that truth happens in language, not beyond it. Meaning is never final. It changes with every new interpretation. This fluidity is not a flaw but a condition of language itself. Post-structuralism pushes this even further. Thinkers like Derrida argue that meaning is always deferred, never fully present. Every word refers to other words, setting off a chain of references that never ends. There is no stable origin. Language is a play of differences. Hermeneutics does not deny this instability, but it also resists total scepticism. Interpretation may be open-ended, but it is not arbitrary. Dialogue, tradition, and shared understanding help ground it. Gadamer's idea of the 'fusion of horizons' captures this.

[119] Davey, N. (2014) 'Hermeneutics, Structuralism and Post-Structuralism', in Malpas, J. and Gander, H.-H. (eds) The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics. London: Routledge.

Different viewpoints can come together, not by erasing differences, but by expanding mutual understanding. Ricoeur and Gadamer both see language as the site where subjectivity and the world meet. The self is not isolated. It is shaped by language, history, and culture. Meaning arises from this relationship. The subject is not the master of meaning but is always involved in a process of negotiation. Understanding becomes a back-and-forth movement between what is said and what is heard, between past meanings and new possibilities. In the end, the contrast between structuralism, post-structuralism, and hermeneutics is not just about theories of language. It reflects deeper views about truth, identity, and the role of the subject. While structuralism analyses systems, and post-structuralism deconstructs them, hermeneutics remains committed to the possibility of understanding through dialogue and openness. Meaning is never fixed, but neither is it meaningless. It unfolds in the tension between tradition and innovation, between structure and speech.

Hermeneutics of action

Paul Ricoeur's work[120] on language and interpretation bridges hermeneutics, structuralism, and post-structuralism. In his triad 'Structure, Word and Event', Ricoeur shows that while linguistic structures are important, they cannot fully explain how meaning happens in real-life communication. Structuralism, shaped by Saussure and later by Levi-Strauss, analyses language as a formal system. But Ricoeur, influenced by Heidegger and Gadamer, sees language as an event—something that unfolds between people. Meaning is not just coded in signs but emerges from speaking, listening, and responding. Ricoeur sees language as rooted in human action, history, and tradition. This view challenges the idea that truth can be fixed by logic or method. Instead, Ricoeur treats truth as something revealed in time. It is not discovered finally but shaped through interpretation and re-interpretation. Meaning unfolds like a story. It is never static. This contrasts with post-structuralism, especially Derrida's idea of endless deferral, where meaning always escapes. Ricoeur does not deny ambiguity, but he does not surrender to it either. He believes understanding is possible, though always provisional. In her reading of Ricoeur, Mara Rainwater emphasises how his theory of narrative adds depth to ethics. Ricoeur distinguishes between the fixed structure of language and its dynamic use in discourse. He argues that identity is not a stable essence, but something formed through stories—what he calls narrative identity. These stories do not just tell who someone is; they shape who that person becomes. For Ricoeur, selfhood is not isolated. It emerges in relation to others and is always in motion. Through narrative, people interpret themselves, their pasts, and their futures. Rainwater connects this to communicative ethics. Ricoeur's focus on language shows that moral responsibility is not only argued but told. Ethics is not limited to rules. It is lived in stories, shaped by how people remember, imagine, and speak. Narrative force transforms facts into meaning and allows people to reframe their experiences. It brings together history and fiction in ways that open new paths for ethical reflection. Richard Kearney takes this further by showing how imagination plays a silent but central role in Ricoeur's thinking. Imagination is not just about creating images. It allows people to refigure time, turning past events into meaningful narratives. These narratives do not simply represent the past. They give it new life and meaning, guiding action in the present. This process, Kearney argues, is inherently ethical. It asks people to imagine others' lives, to carry memory, and to be responsible for what they recall and how they tell it. Ricoeur's hermeneutics of action makes narrative more than a tool for understanding. It becomes a space where ethics and language meet. Through stories, identities are shaped, responsibilities are defined, and the world is

[120] Kearney, R. (ed.) (1996) Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action. London: SAGE.

reinterpreted. This dynamic view of interpretation refuses both rigid certainty and empty relativism. It holds that meaning emerges in dialogue, that truth happens over time, and that ethical life depends on how people tell, hear, and refigure the stories that bind them.

Language of hermeneutics

Rod Coltman[121] explores the ongoing conversation between Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger, focusing on how their views on language and understanding shape the course of modern philosophical hermeneutics. He begins by observing how contemporary thinkers often label themselves as 'postmodern' or 'postmetaphysical' to distance their ideas from the systematic traditions of the past. Yet, this distancing is not as clean as it seems. These labels still carry with them the very assumptions they aim to escape. Even as postmodernism criticises metaphysics, it remains tied to its language and concerns. Coltman contrasts this tendency with Gadamer's approach, which does not try to escape the past but instead enters a dialogue with it. Rather than dismantling tradition, Gadamer attempts to retrieve what remains valuable in it. He does not accept inherited truths uncritically, but he also refuses to treat them as obsolete. In doing so, he offers an alternative to the endless deferral of meaning often found in deconstructive philosophy. Interpretation, for Gadamer, involves risk. It demands that one bring their perspective into contact with the text, fully aware that any understanding is partial, shaped by historical conditions, and open to revision. This is where Gadamer diverges from Heidegger. While Heidegger breaks from metaphysics and turns toward poetry and silence, Gadamer keeps speaking with the tradition, especially with Plato and Hegel. He interprets participation not as submission to fixed forms, but as a living act—one where meaning is shaped through a dialogical process. For him, the dialectic of question and answer is not just a method but the basic mode of being in the world. Truth emerges in conversation, not in isolation or through the application of rigid logic. Coltman describes this relationship as a 'counterturning'. Heidegger moves away from metaphysical language toward poetic topology, while Gadamer turns back toward philosophical dialogue. Yet this movement is not oppositional—it is complementary. Heidegger dismantles, Gadamer retrieves. Heidegger turns inward, Gadamer opens outward. Their approaches are different, but they remain connected in their concern for how language reveals being. Coltman suggests that the irony in their relationship is not a contradiction but a productive tension. It shows how thought can move in opposite directions and still arrive at similar insights. Irony, in this sense, becomes ontological—a condition of thought itself. It reflects the need to think beyond binaries, to accept ambiguity, and to stay open to meaning as it emerges in real time. Gadamer's work offers a way to remain faithful to the philosophical tradition while also challenging it, showing that understanding is always unfinished, always a response to something that speaks. This vision of hermeneutics as a living dialogue challenges both dogmatism and scepticism. It invites thinkers to take interpretive risks, to speak with the past rather than about it, and to see language not as a tool but as a space where truth unfolds.

Hermeneutics and literary theory

Joel Weinsheimer[122] explores how philosophical hermeneutics, especially the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, reshapes literary theory. Instead of treating interpretation as a technical task guided by fixed rules, hermeneutics sees understanding as a historical process, unfolding

[121] Coltman, R. (2004) The Language of Hermeneutics: Gadamer and Heidegger in Dialogue. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
[122] Weinsheimer, J. (2010) 'Philosophical Hermeneutics and Literary Theory', in Malpas, J. and Gander, H. (eds) The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics. London: Routledge.

through dialogue and experience. Weinsheimer makes it clear that this approach does not begin or end with Gadamer, but that his work plays a central role in moving the discussion away from method and toward deeper philosophical reflection. Earlier hermeneutics, like Schleiermacher's, focused on reconstructing the author's intention or establishing guidelines for accurate interpretation. Gadamer shifts this concern. For him, understanding is not about reconstructing the past exactly as it was, but about how the past and present interact. Understanding is not a mechanical operation but an event, shaped by tradition, history, and the openness of the interpreter. The past is not static; it speaks differently depending on the horizon of the reader. What is understood depends on when and by whom it is understood. One of Gadamer's important contributions is the idea of 'fusion of horizons'. This refers to the meeting point between the world of the text and the perspective of the reader. This fusion does not eliminate difference; rather, it works through it. Interpretation becomes a way to negotiate between what is familiar and what is unfamiliar. Weinsheimer compares this to metaphor, where the familiar tenor and the unfamiliar vehicle combine to generate new meaning. Language, in this view, is not neutral or transparent. It is the very place where meaning is created, not merely transmitted. Gadamer also challenges the conventional understanding of language as a system of arbitrary signs, as proposed by Saussure. For Gadamer, language is more than a code. It functions like an image—something that carries its own meaning within itself. This contrasts with the instrumental model of language, where words are merely tools to point at things. Instead, Gadamer sees a word as something that brings the world into presence. This approach pushes against the dominance of semiotics and structuralism in literary theory, offering an alternative that emphasises the living, historical, and dialogical nature of language. Weinsheimer also reflects on the tension between correctness and creativity in interpretation. An interpretation must be tied to the original text to be meaningful, but it must also introduce something new to avoid repetition. This balance resists both rigid objectivity and pure relativism. It acknowledges that texts endure over time precisely because they allow for multiple, evolving interpretations. Gadamer's hermeneutics makes room for tradition without turning it into dogma, and it invites creative engagement without losing touch with the past. In sum, philosophical hermeneutics offers a richer understanding of literary theory by shifting focus from rules and authorial intent to dialogue, tradition, and the transformative power of language. It sees interpretation as a process of meaning-making grounded in historical experience and shaped by the active engagement between text and reader.

Language as hermeneutic

Walter J. Ong's reflections on language[123] and digitisation reveal a deep concern for how meaning is made in an age increasingly shaped by electronic media. In his final work, Ong explores the relationship between language and technology, arguing that all forms of verbal communication—oral, written, printed, or digital—require interpretation. He presents language not as a neutral tool for conveying facts, but as a medium that always demands understanding. Hermeneutics, the art of interpretation, is therefore not a specialised discipline but a condition of human speech. Digitisation, Ong suggests, divides knowledge into discrete units. Computers, unlike humans, operate in binary code, reducing meaning to structure and precision. But this efficiency comes at a cost. Digital systems lack the nuance, ambiguity, and emotion that define human speech. Ong insists that total explicitness in language is impossible. Every utterance point beyond itself, calling for interpretation that can never be final. Meaning lives not in fixed

[123] Ong, W. J. (2017) Language as Hermeneutic: A Primer on the Word and Digitization. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

data but in the space between what is said and what remains unsaid. Drawing on his earlier work in 'Orality and Literacy', Ong traces how communication has evolved across media. He introduces the concept of 'secondary orality', a new kind of speech arising from electronic culture—present in radio, television, and digital media. Unlike the original oral cultures, which lacked writing altogether, secondary orality is shaped by literacy but functions in spoken form. This fusion of the oral and the literate creates a fresh terrain for hermeneutics. Interpretation becomes more complex, but also more necessary, as speech and writing blend in new ways. For Ong, even the genetic code can be seen as a kind of language—structured, yes, but ultimately in need of interpretation. This parallels his view that technological media do not replace human speech but extend its interpretive burden. As texts and data accumulate, the need to interpret grows. Meaning is not embedded in systems but emerges through the human capacity to reflect, compare, and contextualise. Ong also critiques the illusion of permanence in written language. While writing gives a sense of stability, it can never capture the presence of spoken interaction. True presence, he argues, is achieved in the immediacy of face-to-face exchange, where tone, gesture, and bodily cues carry meaning. Martin Buber's notion of the 'I-thou' relationship serves as a model for this kind of dialogue, contrasting with the 'I-it' structure of impersonal data systems. Gadamer's textual hermeneutics, while valuable, must be extended to include the lived, reciprocal nature of oral communication. Ong calls for a renewed understanding of language—one that resists reduction to technical systems. Interpretation is not optional. It is built into every word. In a world flooded with digital information, humans must reclaim the hermeneutic role that only language can perform. Meaning is not given. It is made, and remade, through the act of understanding.

Hermeneutics beyond the text

Language has always carried more than its visible marks or audible sounds. While writing has fundamentally shaped the way humans preserve and transmit meaning, hermeneutics reminds us that interpretation occurs across all forms of communication. Gadamer, in 'Truth and Method', argues that language gains permanence and depth through writing. Paul Ricoeur likewise views writing as the fullest realisation of discourse. These perspectives reflect a strong textual bias rooted in Western thought. Writing's evolution—from pictographic cuneiform to the fully vocalised Greek alphabet—reveals how speech and script have continually shaped each other. Letters, though meaningless in isolation, produce meaning when combined, mirroring how spoken sounds function in all languages. Yet for most of human history, language was not written. Oral traditions shaped societies long before texts existed. Writing introduced powerful new possibilities—standardisation, reproducibility, and the emergence of new forms of speech in media like radio and print. But these gains came with a cost. Writing freezes speech. It breaks the natural flow of language into fragments. Live conversation, rich with gesture and tone, cannot be fully replicated in static symbols. Hermeneutics began as the interpretation of sacred and literary texts, but its reach has broadened. It now includes oral language, gestures, rituals, and even social behaviour. Its task is to make the hidden visible, to show how meaning emerges from interaction. As Ferdinand de Saussure showed, language functions through differences—letters or sounds that gain meaning only within a system. Writing emphasises this structural quality by isolating and arranging signs visually. Thinkers such as Jacques Derrida have expanded the notion of 'text' beyond the page. For Derrida, all human interaction is textual—a field of signs, systems, and forces in constant motion. Paul Zumthor, however, cautions against reducing language to marks or scripts. He argues that the voice, especially in song, expresses dimensions of meaning that escape the limitations of writing. Meaning also depends on what is not said. Language always points beyond itself. In

purely oral cultures, speech draws directly on the context—on the moment, the gesture, the shared background between speaker and listener. Interpretation arises from what is missing as much as from what is spoken. Even the act of naming in these settings requires mutual recognition and shared presence. Philosophers like Gadamer and Plato stress that understanding grows from dialogue, not isolated statements. Dialogue, grounded in trust, creates the space where meaning unfolds. In oral societies, language is performative. It is not a tool for transmitting facts but a shared action. Speech is intertwined with identity, place, and emotion. Studies in cultures from the Caribbean to South America show that talking is often communal, expressive, and overlapping. The goal is not clarity or structure but connection. Writing separates the speaker from the listener. Oral speech joins them. Hermeneutics, then, must not be limited to the interpretation of texts. It must also include the living moment, the face-to-face, and the unsaid. Understanding language means engaging not just with symbols, but with the people who use them.

Logos and digitisation

In 'Language as Hermeneutic', Walter J. Ong traces the development of human thought and communication through the evolving relationship between logos and digitisation. The term logos, often translated as 'word', has ancient roots in the Greek and Indo-European traditions. Originally drawn from the root leg-, meaning to pick up, gather, and arrange, logos carries spatial and tactile associations. It reflects the human impulse to organise experience. While mythos referred to stories and oral traditions, logos developed as a way of structuring meaning in more analytical and abstract forms. Ong argues that this movement from mythos to logos laid the groundwork for digitisation. The introduction of the Greek alphabet, especially its use of vowels, allowed speech to be rendered with a clarity and structure previously unseen. This innovation enabled the separation of speech from its oral context and gave rise to a new form of reasoning. As logos became more systematised, it gave rise to logic, computation, and the binary methods used in print and digital media. The work of thinkers like Peter Ramus, who formalised logic using printed outlines, foreshadowed modern computer processes. These methods break down thought into parts, into binaries, much like today’s digital systems. Modern computers push this logic to its extreme. They operate entirely through binary digits—ones and zeros. Everything, from text to images, is encoded into discrete units. While this allows for extraordinary efficiency and precision, it also erases the nuances that human speech, gesture, and presence provide. Computers fragment reality into countable pieces. They process information, but they do not understand it. Meaning, for Ong, arises not from mechanical order but from human interpretation—an interpretive act grounded in context, dialogue, and shared experience. The shift from oral cultures to literate, printed, and now digitised societies has intensified the need for hermeneutics. Each technological stage enhances our ability to store and manipulate language but also increases the distance between humans and their speech. Oral language is immediate, relational, and full of redundancy and rhythm that aid memory and interaction. Writing and print formalise and fix language. Digital systems go further by disembedding meaning from lived experience, reducing it to pure data. Despite these transformations, Ong insists that all language remains hermeneutic. Even in a digital world, people must interpret what machines present. Information is not knowledge unless understood in context. The binary systems of computers reflect a historical logic rooted in logos, but human understanding exceeds such systems. It draws from mythos, emotion, embodiment, and social exchange—qualities that no digital process can replicate. Ong’s perspective offers a warning and a hope. As technologies grow more powerful, the risk of losing touch with the human

elements of communication increases. But the capacity for interpretation, rooted in the human voice and shared meaning, continues to resist reduction.

Boundaries of language

Hans-Georg Gadamer[124] reflects on the limits and possibilities of language by returning to the foundational role it plays in human understanding. Language, for Gadamer, is not simply a tool for conveying meaning, nor merely a set of grammatical structures. It is the medium through which the world becomes intelligible. Drawing on Aristotle, he emphasises hearing rather than since the sense most aligned with the universality of language. While vision separates and categorises, hearing unites—allowing one to participate in the unfolding of meaning. This listening is the basis of dialogue, where meaning arises not in isolation but between speakers who respond to each other. Gadamer argues that writing introduces a distance between language and the lived moment. In speech, people are bound together in a shared temporality. Writing, by contrast, freezes language, removes it from the immediacy of the encounter, and turns it into an object. This shift marks a self-imposed boundary. But the boundary is not a flaw; rather, it reveals something essential about language itself—its reliance on situation, on presence, on shared context. Language is never complete, and its meanings are never final. Each expression is an attempt to articulate what can never be fully said. Language also unfolds in ritual. Whether in religious liturgy, legal proceedings, or everyday customs, language is embedded in collective actions that give it rhythm and depth. These rituals are not reducible to information transfer. They bind people through repetition and form, shaping understanding in ways that escape direct articulation. Gadamer sees this as a counter to the analytic reduction of language into fixed units. Meaning is found not in isolating words but in participating in the flow of conversation and tradition. Even nonverbal expressions like laughter participate in this dynamic. Laughter is not outside language; it marks a moment of self-awareness, a distancing from one's own speech, and a signal of the playful emergence of meaning. This aligns with how children acquire language—not by rote learning but through active, creative engagement with their surroundings. They sense structures, generate patterns, and make mistakes that reveal their grasp of deeper rules. Gadamer's hermeneutics insists that language is dialogical. It is shaped by the back-and-forth of speaking and listening, by the tension between the said and the unsaid. Language contains within it the silence of what cannot be spoken, and this silence is not absence but potential. In every effort to name, something escapes. The right word is always sought but never quite reached.

Hermeneutics and the human sciences

Paul Ricoeur's essays in 'Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences[125]' explore how written texts change the nature of discourse and reshape the process of interpretation. Once speech is fixed in writing, it detaches from its author, context, and intended listener. The written word becomes autonomous. It no longer unfolds in the shared space of conversation but stands alone, awaiting interpretation. This distance introduces a new hermeneutical task: to understand meaning without relying on the speaker's presence or immediate intention. Reading is no longer a matter of grasping what someone meant to say but of uncovering what the text now says. Ricoeur builds on Wilhelm Dilthey's distinction between explanation and understanding.

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[124] Gadamer, H.-G. (1985) 'Boundaries of Language', in Schmidt, L. K. (ed.) Language and Linguisticality in Gadamer's Hermeneutics. Albany: State University of New York Press.

[125] Ricoeur, P. (1981) Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation, ed. and trans. by John B. Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Explanation seeks causal or structural analysis, following the model of the natural sciences. Understanding, by contrast, aims at grasping the lived meaning behind human expressions. But for Ricoeur, this contrast is too rigid. Once speech becomes text, interpretation cannot be limited to psychological empathy or pure subjectivity. The structure of the text must be accounted for. This leads to a richer model that includes both approaches: a structural explanation of the text's internal logic and a phenomenological engagement with its world of meaning. Ricoeur argues that texts can be analysed structurally, much like myths in Claude Lévi-Strauss's anthropology. Just as myths are composed of repeated units called mythemes, texts consist of structured elements—phrases, themes, oppositions—that relate in patterned ways. These structures do not depend on the author's intent. They belong to the text itself. Through such analysis, one can uncover a text's latent grammar and its underlying narrative rules. This explanatory reading does not seek to revive a past speech act but to map out the internal relationships that give the text coherence. However, Ricoeur does not stop there. He insists that true interpretation also reactivates the text's world. A reader engages the text not as a closed object but as an invitation to reimagine meaning. Reading becomes a dynamic event in which the text's suspended meaning is brought into the present. Here, the structural analysis supports interpretation, grounding it in form, but interpretation carries it further—into appropriation and renewed significance. This model also applies to metaphor. In his essay on metaphor, Ricoeur explains how a word gains new meaning by disrupting its ordinary use. Metaphor operates within a sentence, forcing the clash of literal meanings to produce a novel sense. This process mirrors how a reader engages a text: both involve tensions between fixed forms and emergent meaning. Both challenge the boundary between explanation and understanding. Ricoeur proposes that explanation and interpretation are not opposing methods but complementary stages of the hermeneutical process. A structural account outlines the text's form; interpretation reanimates it. Meaning arises between these two poles—through structure and lived experience. Texts, like metaphors, speak beyond their form. They point toward a world and ask readers to meet them there.

5.3. Typology

(Echoes and archetypes: The literary afterlife of typological thought)

'The type is not a copy but a figure—history shaped to resemble destiny'.

— Thomas R. Preston, From Typology to Literature

'The past is seen not as merely precedent but as prophecy'.

— Northrop Frye, The Great Code: The Bible and Literature

Typology

Typology emerged in early Christian thought to bridge the theological gap between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Although both texts were seen as sacred, certain Jewish practices—like dietary laws or circumcision—were no longer considered binding for Christians. To address this tension, early Church thinkers turned to typology, interpreting figures and events in the Old Testament as prefigurations of Christ. These 'types' were thought to find their true meaning or fulfilment in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul supported this in his letters, particularly in Colossians, and the author of Hebrews expanded on it, asserting that rituals of the old covenant were mere shadows of the new. This form of interpretation was

strongly influenced by Alexandrian thinkers, especially Philo, who merged Jewish tradition with Greek philosophy. Philo treated scripture as allegory, drawing on Platonic ideas about eternal forms and hidden meanings. Early Christians such as Origen built upon this model, developing a theological system where biblical texts operated on multiple levels: literal, moral, and spiritual. Augustine later refined this view, arguing that while the Bible is historically accurate, its deeper spiritual meaning lies in its prophetic structure. He famously contrasted the 'letter' that kills with the 'spirit' that gives life. Over time, figures like Isidore of Seville and Rabanus Maurus codified these interpretations, turning typology into a consistent exegetical practice. Meanwhile, in Jewish traditions, parallel approaches were developing in Rabbinic literature and Kabbalistic texts, including the Pardes model for multi-layered interpretation. Typological thinking extended beyond theology into visual and literary art. Medieval cathedrals displayed scenes that juxtaposed Old Testament stories with New Testament parallels. Works like the Speculum Humanae Salvationis and the Biblia pauperum were widely circulated, visually mapping how figures such as Jonah, Moses, or David symbolically prefigured Christ. These images reinforced religious teachings for an illiterate population and were central to the aesthetics of Christian art. Erich Auerbach, in his essay 'Figura', observed that typology stood alongside other interpretive modes like allegory and myth, but became the dominant framework in Christian Europe. This figural method not only shaped medieval literature and art but persisted into later centuries. The Puritans, for example, used typology to frame their own history. They saw themselves as modern Israelites, their journey across the Atlantic a second Exodus, their settlement in New England a New Zion. Writers like Edward Johnson infused this idea into early colonial narratives, interpreting American experience as sacred history, echoing biblical archetypes. Georg Stöckhardt later distinguished between 'intrinsic' typology—meanings intended by the original text—and 'extrinsic' typology—interpretations applied by later readers. While Stöckhardt rejected the intrinsic kind to safeguard scriptural clarity, later scholarship often accepts both. In narrative criticism, scholars like Mark Allan Powell suggest that typology introduces symbolic dimensions into a story, distinguishing between the narrative's chronological order and its symbolic 'typological' time. Typology, then, is not just a method of interpretation but a symbolic framework that shapes how believers relate past, present, and future. It interprets history through patterns of divine repetition and fulfilment, making theology itself a narrative of echoes.

From typology to literature

In 'From Typology to Literature: Hermeneutics and Historical Narrative in Eighteenth-Century England[126]', Thomas R. Preston explores how biblical interpretative practices shaped the evolution of historical writing and literature in the eighteenth century. Drawing on Hayden White's theory that historical narratives are forms of 'verbal fictions', Preston notes that not all such narratives become literary. What transforms history into literature is not just the use of language or invention, but the ability to elevate facts into something resonant and universal. Ralph Rader's analysis of Boswell's 'Life of Johnson' supports this, showing how the narrative artfully selects and evaluates events to present Johnson's character in an idealised, exemplary way. Preston argues that writers like Boswell, Hume, Gibbon, and Johnson worked within an intellectual tradition that saw history not merely as a report of events but as a literary art. These authors composed historical texts that bore resemblance to epic poetry. David Hume, for instance, likened the structure of history to that of the epic, where unity of action was crucial.

[126] Preston, T. R. (1995) From Typology to Literature: Hermeneutics and Historical Narrative in Eighteenth-Century England. University of Missouri Press.

In the same period, the novel was also emerging as a kind of modern epic, drawing from daily life to build narratives with emotional and moral depth. A key influence on this literary approach to history came from biblical hermeneutics, particularly typology. Typology originally referred to the interpretation of Old Testament figures as prefigurations of New Testament events. Over time, Christian thinkers shifted its meaning from mere prophecy to a more general concept of recurring moral and behavioural patterns. A type was no longer simply a symbolic foreshadowing; it became a template of character traits, a way of predicting conduct. This shift laid the foundation for its use in literature, where biblical figures became models for fictional and historical characters. One example Preston gives is the figure of Nimrod, the obscure biblical king who was interpreted by later commentators as a paradigm of tyranny. Writers such as Humphrey Prideaux and Samuel Shuckford elaborated Nimrod's image as a despotic ruler, turning a vague scriptural reference into a full moral archetype. This archetype then found its way into eighteenth-century literature and history. In novels like Tobias Smollett's 'Humphry Clinker' or Fielding's 'Joseph Andrews', authors used references to Nimrod to frame characters as tyrannical or overbearing. These allusions worked not through direct comparison but through a cultural understanding of types that guided readers' expectations. This typological method also informed how religious and secular historians explained miraculous or morally ambiguous events. In retelling biblical stories, writers like Thomas Stackhouse introduced moral footnotes and rationalised divine interventions, making them seem plausible to an eighteenth-century audience. Even David Hume, though sceptical of religion, drew on biblical types in shaping his account of Oliver Cromwell. Hume depicted Cromwell as a kind of modern Nimrod, but he did not reduce him to the type. Instead, he combined the typological model with historical complexity, acknowledging external circumstances and the influence of others. Preston shows how this method of exemplary reading—using analogies and patterns to frame human behaviour—extended from theology into secular writing. Through typology, authors shaped narrative expectations, using the past as a guide to understanding the present. The influence was not limited to character construction; it also shaped narrative structure. The retelling of historical events was no longer a neutral act. It became a literary endeavour, aiming to convey meaning, continuity, and moral insight through the repetition of recognisable types. This development parallels the broader evolution of language into narrative. Just as typology allowed theologians to connect disparate events through moral or spiritual resonance, narrative language developed the capacity to unify facts into meaningful patterns. The repeated use of character types, narrative arcs, and symbolic motifs helped create a shared framework for storytelling. Theological typology thus became a seedbed for narrative form, influencing both how language was used and how stories were told. The novel benefited from this tradition. Authors shaped characters not merely as individuals but as representatives of broader types—heroes, tyrants, fools, or saints—just as biblical figures had been interpreted. The stories they told were anchored in social and moral concerns but made legible through these inherited structures. In this way, typology did not only explain sacred texts but also shaped secular literature and the historical imagination. Preston concludes that eighteenth-century historical writing and fiction achieved their literary power by adopting typological and hermeneutic strategies. These methods allowed writers to craft narratives that were not just records of what happened, but interpretations of what events meant. They turned the raw material of history into forms that echoed moral universals. Language was transformed into story, and linked the past to enduring patterns of human behaviour.

Anagoge and its interpretative role

Anagoge, from the Greek meaning ascent or spiritual elevation, is one of the four classical methods of interpreting scripture in the medieval Christian tradition. Alongside the literal, allegorical, and moral readings, the anagogical method directs the interpreter's attention beyond earthly concerns toward the heavenly. While the literal refers to historical events, the allegorical prefigures Christ, and the tropological provides moral instruction, the anagogical points upward, revealing hidden meanings about the soul's ultimate destiny. This mode of interpretation became especially significant during the Middle Ages, when theology and metaphysics merged with literary and poetic forms. Hugh of Saint Victor described anagoge not as a simple allegory, but as a reasoning upward—from visible realities to their spiritual causes. In his treatise 'De scripturis et scriptoribus sacris', Hugh outlined this distinction clearly. Allegory might link the crossing of the Red Sea to Christ's resurrection, but anagoge would take that event further, toward the promise of eternal life. It is not merely symbolic, but eschatological in its direction. Dante Alighieri famously embraced the fourfold method in his 'Divine Comedy'. In a letter to his patron Can Grande, Dante explained that his poem could be read on several levels—literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical. The ascent of the pilgrim from the dark wood through Hell and Purgatory into Paradise serves not just as a moral journey, but as a symbolic ascent of the soul to divine understanding. The poem's structure itself embodies anagogical logic: it is a journey not merely through narrative spaces, but through layers of being. The power of anagoge lies in its capacity to move beyond representation. It is not interested in the world as it is, or even as it should be, but as it might be understood through divine revelation. Unlike allegory, which often remains bound to historical events and figures, anagoge opens a horizon where those events are signs of eternal truths. It demands a kind of faith in language's capacity to carry meanings that exceed the literal and moral realms. Anagoge also serves as a counterpoint to more rationalist and historicist approaches. Where those might seek coherence in scripture by aligning it with archaeology or social context, anagoge assumes that meaning comes from above, not from below. It works not by deduction, but by orientation—turning the reader's vision heavenward. The act of interpretation itself becomes a spiritual discipline, not just an intellectual exercise. Though less prominent in contemporary hermeneutics, anagoge remains essential for understanding how medieval thinkers approached texts. It signals a worldview in which language, narrative, and experience are all layered and infused with transcendental significance. In this interpretive model, scripture is not exhausted by its surface; it conceals within it a path toward salvation.

Hyperdiffusionism

Hyperdiffusionism is a controversial and widely rejected theory that claims most or all cultural and technological achievements across ancient civilisations originated from a single, advanced source. It suggests that similarities between distant societies—such as pyramid building in Egypt and Mesoamerica—are not coincidental or the result of parallel development, but stem from one common origin. Unlike traditional diffusionism, which emphasises gradual exchange of ideas through contact, hyperdiffusionism pushes a monogenetic model of cultural history. This theory often relies on weak analogies and overlooks the complex, independent development of human societies. Instead of acknowledging that different groups can solve similar problems in similar ways, hyperdiffusionism attributes all innovation to a single lost civilisation. Egypt, Atlantis, Lemuria, and even ancient aliens have all been proposed as this civilisational source. For example, the claim that ancient Egyptians travelled to the Americas to build pyramids reflects this thinking. Such ideas are difficult to test and rarely supported by

archaeological evidence. They typically rest on visual resemblances and speculative narratives rather than verifiable data. One of the best-known examples involves the Tucson artefacts, objects allegedly discovered in Arizona that resemble Roman relics. Hyperdiffusionists claimed these were evidence that Romans had made transatlantic journeys. Scholars, however, pointed out major inconsistencies, including stylistic anomalies and the absence of a supporting archaeological context. Similarly, proponents of hyperdiffusionism have claimed that cultural traits like writing systems, astronomy, and metalworking in the Americas, Africa, or Asia must have come from a single 'mother' civilisation. This not only ignores the agency of indigenous peoples but also risks endorsing a Eurocentric or colonial narrative by portraying non-European cultures as incapable of independent development. In contrast, mainstream anthropologists and archaeologists favour a model of trans-cultural diffusion. This approach acknowledges that ideas and technologies spread through trade, migration, and long-term contact networks. Cultural similarities can emerge through shared human experiences, environmental constraints, and the inherent creativity of societies. Independent invention and convergent evolution are well-documented phenomena that do not require a hyperdiffusionist explanation. Hyperdiffusionism often serves as a modern myth rather than a scientific hypothesis. It appeals to those fascinated by lost continents, ancient mysteries, and conspiracies about forgotten knowledge. However, its methodological flaws make it more a matter of belief than evidence-based inquiry. The theory tends to disregard local contexts and historical complexity in favour of sweeping generalisations. By collapsing the diversity of cultural histories into a single origin story, hyperdiffusionism undermines the richness of human innovation. It simplifies the past into a linear narrative driven by a mythical progenitor, rather than recognising the multiple pathways through which civilisations evolve.

The modes of modern writing

In 'The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature[127]', David Lodge explores how modern literature operates through complex interactions between linguistic structure and reader response. The difficulty of defining literature is his starting point. While some traditions emphasise fictionality—literature as language freed from the obligation of truth—others highlight its aesthetic dimension, the way it draws attention to itself as language. Lodge argues that neither perspective is enough on its own, but together they help explain the unique quality of literary discourse. Central to Lodge's approach is the idea of 'foregrounding', a concept developed by the Czech structuralists, particularly Jan Mukařovský and Roman Jakobson. Foregrounding describes the deliberate deviation from ordinary language to create artistic effects. It depends on contrast—an aesthetic pattern set against a familiar background of linguistic norms. A poem by T. S. Eliot, for instance, stands out not just because it is poetry but because it departs from both traditional poetic norms and common speech, producing a distinctive modernist tension. This structuralist view implies that literature gains much of its force from its form. However, critics like Ruqaiya Hasan suggest that literary meaning lies not only in linguistic form but also in thematic unity. Yet this position runs into trouble when one considers works such as essays or biographies that are treated as literature without relying on metaphor or symbol. Lodge instead proposes a more flexible notion: literature is a form of discourse that invites a special kind of attention, a reading 'as if' the text was fictional or constructed with aesthetic intent. Jakobson's model of communication helps clarify this. While everyday language focuses on transmitting

[127] Lodge, D. (1977) The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature. London: Edward Arnold.

information, literary language draws attention to its own structure. The message becomes the message. This shift in focus accounts for how some non-literary texts, such as scientific writing or historical narrative, can become literary if read in a certain way. Conversely, some texts are recognised as literary regardless of their content because they belong to a literary tradition. The dynamic between writing and reading is essential. Literature is not just a static category of texts; it is a relationship between the form of the text and how readers approach it. Readers play an active role in interpreting structure, tone, and aesthetic choices. This makes literature a flexible and evolving category, shaped by cultural habits and interpretative expectations. As Lodge emphasises, fictionality and aesthetic awareness are not fixed properties, but effects generated through this reader-text interaction. A major part of Lodge's argument builds on Jakobson's distinction between metaphor and metonymy. Metaphor operates through substitution based on similarity, while metonymy connects elements that are already contextually linked. In practice, most literary works use both modes. Realist fiction leans toward metonymy, grounding meaning in the detail of everyday life. Metaphor, on the other hand, introduces poetic resonance, but if used excessively it can break the illusion of reality. Writers must therefore manage a balance: controlling metaphor so it enriches without overwhelming the text's internal coherence. Lodge's typology shows how modern literature reflects the tension between these two modes. Writers like Wordsworth favour context-bound, metonymic language, while modernists like Eliot use metaphoric dislocation to fracture conventional meanings. In each case, literary value arises from the play between linguistic form and readerly interpretation. Literature is not just about what is said, but how it is said—and how it is read.

Sacred language, sacred world

Joshua D. Broggi's study 'Sacred Language, Sacred World: The Unity of Scriptural and Philosophical Hermeneutics[128]' invites readers to reconsider the relationship between scripture, tradition, and reason not as three separate pillars of theology, but as expressions of a single, unified experience. He begins with the Kimbanguists, a Christian movement from the Belgian Congo, whose reinterpretation of the Bible placed an African prophet, Simon Kimbangu, at the centre of divine revelation. For colonial authorities and Western missionaries, this was heresy. For the local community, it was a living truth. The Bible, removed from its European context and received in a different world, produced a new theology and a new community. This story becomes more than a narrative about religious difference—it becomes a case study in hermeneutics. It shows how the meaning of a sacred text depends not just on what it says, but on where and how it is read. Broggi argues that debates about scripture inevitably reveal assumptions about the world. When theologians ask whether a passage means one thing or another, they are also asking about the kind of world in which that meaning makes sense. In different contexts, the same text gives rise to different interpretations, not due to misreading, but because each community inhabits a different interpretive world. The theologian's task is not to choose between interpretations, but to ask how those interpretations are formed. This move transforms theology into an inquiry into the structure of lived experience. Martin Heidegger, whose early lectures influenced both theologians and philosophers, insisted on keeping theology and philosophy apart. He classified theology as a 'positive science', bound to specific doctrinal commitments, while philosophy, he argued, could ask deeper questions about the conditions for meaning. But Broggi challenges this divide. If both theology and philosophy emerge from the same human background—the same language, the same teleologies, the same

[128] Broggi, J. D. (2015) Sacred Language, Sacred World: The Unity of Scriptural and Philosophical Hermeneutics. Oxford: Peter Lang.

social patterns—then their separation seems artificial. Theological statements, like philosophical ones, are embedded in a world that gives them sense. Heidegger himself recognised this when reading Paul's epistles, noting how eschatological anticipation structures the Christian experience of time. This insight, Broggi claims, should lead not to a split between theology and philosophy, but to their unification. Language plays a central role in this argument. It is not a neutral code for expressing ideas, but a form of life that brings worlds into being. For Broggi, sacred language is world-shaping. The meaning of religious terms, rites, and doctrines depends on the world in which they are practiced. A liturgical phrase or a scriptural verse carries different weight in Rome, Lagos, or Kinshasa. These differences are not just cultural—they are ontological. They show how scripture, tradition, and reason cannot be disentangled from the lives that interpret them. The theological implications are clear. Interpreting scripture is not simply about recovering original meaning or adhering to orthodox tradition. It is about seeing how these acts of interpretation organise the world. When one community sees an icon and another sees an idol, the object has not changed—only the world in which it appears. Sacred language reveals this world, and the work of theology is to study its structure, its history, and its consequences. Broggi's proposal is not to dissolve doctrine into relativism but to recognise that theological meaning arises within a shared but evolving world. This view makes room for pluralism without giving up the search for truth. It asks theologians to remain aware of the background assumptions that shape their interpretations and to acknowledge the role of narrative, ritual, and community in giving sacred texts their life.

No escape from ideology

In 'Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences', Paul Ricoeur revisits the complex relationship between science and ideology. He begins with a reminder from Aristotle: precision in knowledge depends on the nature of the subject. In politics and ethics, where things are fluid and contingent, one should not expect the same level of exactness found in mathematics or the natural sciences. This ancient insight frames the rest of the inquiry. Ricoeur does not treat ideology as mere distortion or illusion. Instead, he explores its function as a symbolic mechanism that social groups use to represent and sustain themselves. A key mistake, Ricoeur argues, is defining ideology only in terms of social class, a view shaped by Marxist traditions. Another danger is reducing it to the justification of domination. Both views, while not entirely false, oversimplify ideology. It is not just about power or deception. It also performs a constructive role. Through rituals, symbols, and foundational myths, communities give meaning to their existence. Revolutions, charters, and constitutions are not frozen moments. They are reinterpreted across time, woven into narratives that hold societies together. Drawing on Max Weber's theory of social action, Ricoeur describes ideology as a group's effort to produce an image of itself. This image is never neutral. It reduces complexity, organises memory, and motivates action. It works through slogans, doctrines, and simplified codes. Liberalism, socialism, nationalism—all are forms of ideological shorthand. Such systems are inherently rhetorical. They persuade, conceal, and create a sense of certainty. But over time, they can become rigid, blind to the realities they once sought to represent. This is ideology's paradox: it opens the world by creating meaning, then closes it by reducing that meaning to a fixed scheme. Marx's idea of ideology as inversion—a distortion akin to the camera obscura—is central to this analysis. For Marx, ideology flips reality, hiding the true nature of economic relations. Ricoeur extends this metaphor to modern science and technology. Even scientific knowledge, he argues, is not immune to ideological distortion. In capitalist societies, science can become a servant of the system, used not to question but to confirm existing structures. This shows that ideology is not tied to content. It is a function of how symbols organise experience.

Ricoeur then questions the possibility of a non-ideological social science. Can the study of society be neutral? He is sceptical. The methods of the natural sciences—based on verification, falsification, and prediction—do not easily apply to human action. Social theories are always embedded in the very world they seek to describe. Even critical theories, which claim to unmask ideology, risk becoming ideological themselves when they harden into dogma. In the end, Ricoeur offers no escape from ideology. But he does not see this as defeat. Rather, he calls for a reflective practice that acknowledges its own limitations. The task is not to eliminate ideology but to understand how it works and how it shapes both science and society.

6. OBFUSCATION

6.1. Gramaticalisation

(From speech to structure: The drift of grammatical meaning)

'Grammaticalisation involves not just simplification but the sedimentation of discourse history into structure'.

— Joan Bybee, Language, Usage and Cognition

'The history of grammatical structures is the history of expressive forms fading into background noise'.

— Bernd Heine & Tania Kuteva, The Genesis of Grammar

Grammaticalisation

Grammaticalisation is the process by which words that originally had concrete, lexical meanings gradually change into words with abstract, grammatical functions. This phenomenon explains how languages evolve over time, not through the invention of new grammatical forms from scratch, but by transforming existing words into new roles. For example, the Old English verb willan, meaning 'to want' or 'to wish', has shifted into the modern auxiliary verb will, which expresses future intention. Over time, many such transitions have taken place, turning nouns and verbs into prepositions, conjunctions, auxiliaries, case markers, or inflectional suffixes. Grammaticalisation reveals how flexible language is. Words are not static; they shift in meaning and function as speakers find more efficient ways to express complex relationships. A good example is the phrase let us, which becomes let us in modern usage. This change reduces and simplifies the original phrase, and the meaning also shifts from an expression of permission to a kind of informal suggestion. The pronoun us is eventually absorbed into a suffix, and the phrase becomes a new grammatical item with a different role in the sentence. The process usually moves from specific to general, from content to function, from meaning to form. This is the principle of unidirectionality, a key concept in Grammaticalisation theory. However, this process does not happen all at once. It unfolds in stages and involves changes on multiple levels—semantic, morphological, and phonetic. For instance, semantic bleaching is when a word loses much of its original meaning. Phonetic erosion reduces the sound structure of a word. Morphological reduction simplifies word forms, and obligatorification makes a word or structure more necessary in each context. Over time, these shifts turn a fully independent word into a grammatical tool. The history of grammaticalisation as a concept can be traced back to

early nineteenth-century linguists like Wilhelm von Humboldt and Antoine Meillet. Humboldt saw language as evolving from concrete to abstract forms. Meillet later formalised the term 'grammaticalisation' and defined it as the assignment of grammatical function to a word that was once autonomous. In the twentieth century, interest in grammaticalisation waned due to a focus on synchronic analysis. But in the 1970s, the topic regained attention. Scholars like Christian Lehmann and Bernd Heine brought fresh insights and methods. Lehmann introduced a set of parameters to measure the extent and nature of grammatical change. Grammaticalisation is often thought to be a one-way street. However, a few counterexamples—known as degrammaticalisation—challenge this view. These are rare cases where a grammatical form seems to return to a more lexical role. One example is the English possessive 's', which has shifted from a suffix to something closer to a clitic. Another is seen in the development of auxiliary verbs in regional dialects, where a grammatical marker may regain independent meaning and function. Though such cases are exceptional, they remind linguists that language change is not always linear. There are also competing definitions and frameworks for understanding grammaticalisation. Some linguists, like Paul Hopper, have outlined principles such as layering, divergence, and persistence, which describe how older and newer forms coexist and evolve. Others, like František Lichtenberk and Elizabeth Traugott, view the process in terms of syntactic and semantic shifts. Still others focus on the tension between lexicon and grammar, or between form and function. Despite these different approaches, most scholars agree on the core idea: grammaticalisation is a historical process where words shift from concrete meanings to abstract grammatical roles. It is one of the key mechanisms through which languages change and adapt. Some argue that the process reflects a natural drive in language to become more efficient and expressive. Understanding grammaticalisation not only sheds light on the structure of language, but also on the way humans shape meaning over time. As people reuse and reinterpret words, language systems adapt, incorporating new forms and retiring old ones. This dynamic cycle ensures that language remains both stable enough to communicate and flexible enough to evolve. Grammaticalisation is not just a technical concept. It helps explain how languages grow, simplify, and complexify in unexpected ways. From the shift of verbs into auxiliaries to the transformation of case markers into postpositions, grammaticalisation gives a window into how humans repurpose old tools to meet new communicative needs. It reveals the creativity and economy behind everyday speech, and it challenges the idea that grammar is fixed or static. Instead, grammar is a living system, always in motion. Language does not simply reflect the world—it is shaped by use, and grammaticalisation is one of the most powerful ways that use leaves its mark.

Abstraction of language

As language scales up from intimate contexts to large, impersonal collectives, it does not simply grow—it transforms. The process of grammaticalisation, often described in neutral technical terms, hides within it a deeper historical tendency: the abstraction and depersonalisation of speech in proportion to the size and complexity of the social group. What begins as direct, grounded, and experiential language—rooted in shared bodily and emotional life—gradually becomes more abstract, generalised, and distant. This drift is not accidental. It follows a structural logic, like gravity pulling language upward from the living earth of human interaction into the cold air of systemic control. Grammaticalisation refers to the process by which content words—nouns and verbs with specific, sensory meaning—evolve into grammatical markers. A word like go becomes part of the auxiliary phrase going to, which in turn becomes gonna, no longer referring to actual movement but to future intent. Over time, verbs of action, nouns of substance, or phrases of emotional intensity are emptied of their

concrete content and repurposed to serve grammatical functions. This shift is not merely linguistic but deeply social. As groups grow, language adapts to manage scale. It becomes less about sharing meaning between people and more about managing populations. In small-scale societies, language tends to be direct, rooted in face-to-face interaction, shared knowledge, and embodied experience. Pronouns refer to people physically present. Verbs align with visible actions. Grammar is simple because redundancy is unnecessary. The speaker and listener live in proximity; misunderstanding can be corrected on the spot. There is no need for elaborate markers of tense, modality, or agreement because the context is shared. But as societies expand, context is lost. Communication must now travel across space and time, from strangers to strangers. In this transition, grammar steps in as a substitute for shared life. Grammaticalisation is the linguistic response to this loss. It compensates for the absence of shared meaning by introducing increasingly formal structures. Instead of pointing or gesturing, speakers must now encode spatial, temporal, and social information directly into their speech. Language becomes bureaucratic. Tense systems, modal verbs, case endings, and agreement rules evolve to manage ambiguity, impersonality, and distance. These tools are necessary when communication becomes less about understanding and more about organising, commanding, and categorising. Grammar becomes the skeleton of speech—rigid, repetitive, and optimised for scale. The parallels with large-scale insect societies are striking. In ant colonies or termite mounds, communication is not about individual meaning but about signalling, coordination, and role differentiation. Each signal must be processed by thousands, even millions, of others. Precision, abstraction, and standardisation become the conditions of survival. Language, in mass societies, becomes less about communion and more about instruction. This is especially evident in the rise of formalised bureaucratic languages, legal codes, religious texts, and standardised education systems. These forms of language are heavily grammaticalised, filled with auxiliaries, passive constructions, and nominalisations. They are optimised not for expression, but for control. Grammaticalisation, then, is not a neutral process. It reveals the tendency of language to shift away from life as it scales. It creates distance—not just between speaker and listener, but between word and world. A word like must, once expressive of inner necessity, becomes a modal of obligation. The personal becomes impersonal. The command replaces the desire. The increase in grammatical forms maps the increase in alienation between language and life. The very structure of speech begins to encode hierarchy, discipline, and control. This trajectory leads to a kind of linguistic entropy: as words become more abstract, their referential power weakens. Speech fills with empty forms. Grammatical markers multiply but meaning thins. What was once spoken to share a world becomes a system for sorting bodies, managing behaviour, and enforcing norms. The abstraction of grammar mirrors the abstraction of social life in large societies. People become roles; speech becomes protocol. Such a view does not deny the utility of grammar. It recognises its historical function. But it also asks whether language, in its most evolved grammatical forms, serves people—or whether it begins to serve institutions, systems, and powers that require linguistic conformity. The transformation of words into grammatical tools reflects the transformation of individuals into subjects. Grammaticalisation becomes a political process masked as linguistic evolution. In the end, grammaticalisation is not just a linguistic curiosity. It is a symptom of a deeper transformation in human life. As people grow distant from one another, as societies become too large for direct communion, language adapts by becoming less human and more mechanical. It sheds its skin of intimacy and puts on the armour of abstraction. What begins as a way of speaking ends as a way of ruling. This is the dark side of grammaticalisation: the erosion of speech as shared meaning, and the rise of speech as system. It is not just a path of linguistic change, but a sign of civilisational drift—from understanding to administration, from dialogue to directive, from

conversation to command. The abstraction of language starts from intimacy and ends in mass confusion.

Grammar as a stabiliser in communication

Grammaticalisation describes how certain linguistic expressions gradually lose their original meaning and become fixed grammatical elements within a language. In 'Ten Lectures on Grammaticalisation[129]' Christian Lehmann explains that this is not a sudden shift, but a process shaped by usage, repetition, and social interaction. What starts as a flexible phrase or word eventually becomes rigid, bound by the internal rules of grammar. For instance, in English, the verb 'have' once meant 'to possess', but it later transformed into a grammatical auxiliary that helps express the perfect tense, as in 'I have eaten'. This shift reflects a broader pattern: elements that were once expressive and optional become obligatory parts of a language's grammatical structure. The process affects not just individual words but entire constructions. Lehmann highlights how phrases like 'have + past participle' solidify into paradigms. In this way, grammaticalisation is not just about individual lexemes becoming auxiliaries or suffixes. It is about entire constructions being absorbed into the system of a language until they behave like fixed grammatical rules. This kind of structural entrenchment can be observed in many world languages and is a cornerstone of linguistic change. Although some have questioned whether grammaticalisation counts as a proper linguistic theory, Lehmann argues that it provides a clear and practical model for understanding language variation and development. The process is visible in every known language, and its mechanisms—semantic reduction, formal erosion, and structural fixation—are remarkably consistent. Even though the terminology varies—some prefer 'grammaticisation' to avoid confusion—its conceptual foundation remains widely accepted. One of the clearest examples is the phrase 'be going to', originally a movement construction. Over time, it became a way to express future intent. As the phrase was used more frequently for predictions rather than describing motion, its meaning shifted. Eventually, it lost all sense of physical movement, becoming part of a grammatical structure. In spoken English, this form evolved further into 'gonna', reflecting phonetic erosion, another hallmark of grammaticalisation. This shows how language changes both semantically and formally, as concrete meaning fades and form contracts. Similar shifts can be seen in how demonstratives become articles, or how the numeral 'one' evolves into an indefinite article in many languages. Even spatial expressions—such as those used to describe location—can turn into grammatical markers of aspect. These are not isolated cases. They follow a cross-linguistic pattern, showing that grammaticalisation is not random but driven by regular pressures in language use. Lehmann outlines how grammaticalisation usually unfolds in two stages. First, a syntactic phrase starts to play a grammatical role. Then, over time, this phrase becomes fully absorbed into the language's morphology. In the process, the original meanings of the components fade, their forms erode, and the construction becomes fixed. This evolution increases redundancy in language, reducing ambiguity and minimising the need for listeners to infer context. Grammar thus acts as a stabiliser in communication, and grammaticalisation is one of the mechanisms through which this stability is achieved. While rare, there are some counterexamples, known as degrammaticalisation, where grammatical elements revert to lexical use. These are exceptions and usually arise in highly creative or non-standard forms of speech. Most often, the process of grammaticalisation moves in one direction—from free and meaningful to bound and functional. In sum, grammaticalisation illustrates how language adapts to the needs of communication. It

[129] Lehmann, C. (2015) Ten Lectures on Grammaticalization. Leiden: Brill.

turns phrases that once carried specific meaning into structures that serve broader grammatical functions. This process reflects a deeper tendency in human language: the shift from the expressive to the systemic is one of the most powerful forces shaping language evolution.

Patterns of linguistic change

Grammaticalisation has become central to understanding how languages evolve, especially within typology and functional linguistics. Over the past thirty years, research in this area has shown that languages do not change arbitrarily but follow regular paths shaped by cognitive and communicative patterns. The 'Trends in Linguistics[130]' volume, dedicated to Christian Lehmann, brings together studies that explore the nature of grammaticalisation, the structure of grammatical change, and the limits of directionality. The contributions demonstrate how certain expressions lose their independence and become embedded in the grammatical system of a language. At its core, grammaticalisation involves a linguistic unit losing its flexibility and autonomy in both paradigmatic and syntagmatic roles. This happens gradually. Parameters such as integrity, variability, scope, and obligatoriness shift, leading to the semantic fading of a word and its phonological reduction. For example, a word that once carried rich meaning can become a fixed grammatical marker, narrowing its function and making its use obligatory. Syntagmatic changes like fusion and fixation also contribute, turning free combinations into tightly bound structures. The process often begins with a choice among lexical options to fill a grammatical role. In languages like Korean and Maltese, full verbs start to act as grammatical auxiliaries. In Japanese, honorific markers have undergone similar shifts, developing new speaker-oriented meanings. These examples reflect broader, cross-linguistic tendencies. Though each language follows its path, certain patterns—such as full verbs turning into auxiliaries or nouns becoming articles—are seen repeatedly around the world. One key topic in the volume is the directionality of grammaticalisation. Most research supports the idea that change flows in one direction: from lexical to grammatical, from flexible to fixed. Reversal of this process, known as degrammaticalisation, is rare. The volume presents examples like English's genitives becoming a clitic, or expressions in Russian shifting toward wider usage. Still, these cases do not challenge the general tendency that grammaticalisation moves toward reduction, fixation, and regularisation. The shift is not random—it is guided by communicative economy and structural pressures. A particularly interesting contribution comes from Elena Maslova, who offers an evolutionary view. She argues that language change must be understood through both mutation and selection. Mutations, or small changes in usage, happen at the level of individual speakers. But selection—what gets picked up by a wider community—determines which changes survive. According to Maslova, range-expanding mutations, which make a form usable in more contexts, are more noticeable and thus more likely to spread. In contrast, range-reducing changes are harder to detect and often remain isolated. The book is organised into four parts. The first explores foundational issues like directionality and cycles. The second examines noun phrases and prepositions, while the third focuses on verbs and agreement. The final section connects grammaticalisation to larger constructions, including modal particles and social hierarchies. Across these topics, a shared theme emerges: grammaticalisation is not a chaotic process but a structured transformation, deeply rooted in human interaction. This research shows that grammaticalisation is a powerful framework for analysing how grammar changes over time. It reveals how everyday usage and social dynamics shape the rules that structure language. Despite occasional reversals, the overall movement is toward simplification,

[130] Bisang, W. & Hock, H. H. (eds) (2006) Trends in Linguistics: Studies and Monographs 205. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

regularisation, and increased integration into the system. It is this process that helps languages remain stable and efficient across generations. While such processes preserve the stability of languages, for individuals they often serve to obscure and erode genuine human connection, serving primarily societal goals.

Rethinking grammaticalisation

Grammaticalisation is often viewed as a process that brings order to language by transforming lexical elements into grammatical ones. But Livio Gaeta's chapter 'Rethinking Grammaticalisation: New Perspectives[131]' offers a different view. He argues that grammaticalisation can distort grammar by creating mismatches between form and meaning. These mismatches challenge the regularity of a language and often result from historical layering, incomplete change, or outside influence. Instead of producing a smooth transition, grammaticalisation sometimes leaves behind inconsistencies that resist full integration into the language system. Mismatch, in this context, refers to a disconnect between how a form looks and what it is expected to mean or do. As grammaticalisation processes evolve, they can generate constructions that no longer align with a language's core patterns. Gaeta shows that these mismatches are not just historical remnants but active signs of ongoing change. In Latin, for instance, forms like -dam and -pse attached to pronouns created combinations that clashed with expected patterns of agreement. In Basque, a new progressive form introduced a split in syntactic alignment, changing how verbs related to subjects and objects. These examples show that grammaticalisation does not always unify or simplify grammar. It can also introduce irregularities. A common source of mismatch is what Gaeta calls the 'unchanged residue' of grammaticalisation. These are parts of the language where the process did not complete its work. Sometimes inertia prevents change from reaching every part of a paradigm. In Germanic languages, weak and strong verb inflections coexist because grammaticalisation stalled before resolving the older forms. In other cases, grammatical rules block further extension. A construction may be grammatically useful in one context but excluded in another because of overarching constraints. This leaves behind patchy systems, full of exceptions and partial forms. Another way mismatches arise is through external influence. Language contact can interfere with the natural trajectory of grammaticalisation. Khmer, for example, did not develop a full system of morphological marking partly because of contact with Thai and Vietnamese. Meanwhile, Vietnamese, shaped by Chinese, developed structures like right-headedness that clash with earlier syntactic expectations. These shifts show that languages are not closed systems. External pressures can redirect the evolution of grammar, introducing mismatches that would not arise internally. Gaeta also discusses mismatches in German that stem from verb phrase constructions. In the perfect tense, modal verbs block the use of the past participle. This creates a surface-level inconsistency that reflects a deeper, incomplete grammaticalisation process. What looks like a quirk in the system is a trace of diachronic change still in progress. In the end, Gaeta's contribution highlights a central insight: grammaticalisation is not a clean or predictable process. It interacts with structural constraints, social dynamics, and historical residue. Mismatches are not errors—they are part of how languages change. Understanding them can reveal the underlying forces that shape grammar over time.

[131] Gaeta, L. (2012) 'Mismatch: Grammar Distortion and Grammaticalization', in López-Couso, M. J. and Seoane, E. (eds) Rethinking Grammaticalization: New Perspectives. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Future in language, the present in mind

In 'The Grammaticalisation of the Future Does Not Influence Recognition of Relevant Health Information[132]' Tiziana Jäggi, Sayaka Sato, and Pascal Mark Gygax explored whether the grammaticalisation of the future tense shapes how people remember health information. Their study focused on the idea that the way a language treats future events—through its grammar—might influence how those events are mentally processed. Specifically, they tested if different degrees of future time reference (FTR) would impact memory recognition for health messages about natural remedies. The hypothesis was straightforward: a less marked future in grammar might make the message feel more immediate, and therefore, more memorable. But their results found no such effect. The idea comes from earlier theories, like Keith Chen's claim that people speaking languages with a marked future tense are less likely to engage in future-oriented behaviours like saving money or adopting healthy habits. That theory drew attention because it suggested that grammar might shape real-world decisions. Jäggi and colleagues wanted to test the idea in a controlled setting, using recognition memory as a window into how language might influence mental representations of the future. They recruited sixty native German speakers and exposed them to health messages written in either high-FTR or low-FTR grammatical forms. Some messages used present tense with time indicators (low-FTR), while others used future tense forms (high-FTR). Afterwards, participants were asked to recognise which remedies they had seen. If the theory held, those who read the messages in low-FTR form—suggesting more immediacy—would recall the remedies more accurately. But the data showed no significant difference. Recognition scores were similar regardless of the grammatical framing. Interestingly, age and the sequence of message presentation had more impact than grammatical form. Older participants performed slightly better on recognition tasks, and messages presented closer to the recognition phase were more easily recalled. This suggests that familiarity or relevance may play a bigger role than abstract grammatical structures in shaping memory for future-related content. The study challenges assumptions about the psychological influence of grammar. While the theoretical framework connecting FTR to cognitive behaviour is compelling, its effects may be too subtle to detect through simple recognition tasks. Grammar shapes thinking not at the level of memory, but through more complex mechanisms like decision-making or emotional framing. It is also possible that the experimental setup was too artificial. Health decisions in real life involve context, emotion, and personal stakes, which are not easily replicated in a lab. These findings align with other recent studies that have failed to replicate the effects predicted by the Language-Savings Hypothesis. Rather than dismissing the idea entirely, Jäggi et al. suggest that future research should explore alternative approaches, such as narrative immersion or long-term behavioural tracking. In short, how people talk about the future may not directly influence how they remember it—at least not in the way this study tested. The grammar of the future might not be a shortcut to better memory, but it remains a part of the puzzle in understanding how language shapes human thought.

Lexicalisation and the drift of language

In her analysis of lexicalisation and grammaticalisation, Laurel J. Brinton[133] addresses how words gradually shift in meaning, form, and function across time. These changes often go unnoticed in everyday speech. When someone says, 'We are celebrating a fascinating holiday today', most hear only the message, not the mechanisms behind it. Yet within this sentence are

[132] Jäggi, T., Sato, S. and Gygax, P. (2023) The Grammaticalization of the Future Does Not Influence Recognition of Relevant Health Information. Department of Psychology, University of Fribourg.
[133] Brinton, L. J. (2000) Lexicalization and Language Change. Cambridge University Press.

several examples of how language changes. Words like 'holiday' and 'celebrate' once had quite different meanings or uses, but through use and repetition, they evolved. Some terms, like 'fascinating', began as active processes and have since become descriptive. These shifts reveal how language moves from concrete to abstract, from expressive to structural. Brinton's book investigates these movements under the larger question of how words enter and transform within a language's system. She distinguishes between lexicalisation—the process where expressions become single lexical units—and grammaticalisation—where independent words or phrases become grammatical markers. These two processes, while different, often intersect. Brinton notes that grammaticalisation has received more scholarly attention, but lexicalisation remains just as vital for understanding how languages adapt over time. This text aims to bring lexicalisation to the forefront by mapping its relationship to grammar, historical change, and cognitive structures. A major theme is that language change is not binary. There is no clear switch from lexical to grammatical or vice versa. Instead, Brinton proposes a continuum. Words and expressions move along this line slowly. Some begin as vivid, descriptive terms and over generations become functional scaffolds within a sentence. Others resist change or evolve unevenly, creating blends of meaning that challenge neat categorisation. The suffix '-ing', for instance, appears in both verbal (celebrating) and adjectival (fascinating) roles, showing how the same form can follow divergent paths. Brinton also engages with how linguists define grammar and the lexicon. Generative linguists treat grammar as an internal, rule-based system, separate from the lexicon, which is a list of stored items. Functional linguists, by contrast, see grammar and lexicon as deeply intertwined, shaped by communication, culture, and cognitive demands. Brinton leans toward a blended view, suggesting that both formal structure and communicative use influence language change. Her analysis shows how structural rules and social patterns work together to shape language. Language change, Brinton argues, is neither abrupt nor arbitrary. It follows patterns—sometimes shaped by analogy, sometimes by the reinterpretation of forms. Words do not disappear but shift roles. Communities often use older and newer forms side by side for generations. The evolution of a word from lexical item to grammatical marker does not erase its past, but layers new functions on top of the old. Brinton's work challenges the idea that language is static or that grammar is separate from meaning. Lexicalisation and grammaticalisation both reveal that speech is always in motion. They show how people not only use language but also reshape it through repetition, context, and time. Words become habits. Habits become rules. And out of this slow transformation, grammar emerges.

How words lose their autonomy

In her study 'Grammaticalisation and Semantic Reanalysis[134]', Regine Eckardt approaches an old question with renewed focus: where does grammar come from? If humans only needed to communicate about objects or actions, complex grammatical systems might seem unnecessary. Yet every natural language develops intricate grammatical frameworks. This suggests that grammar is not a technical add-on but something deeply rooted in the human mind. Eckardt's work tries to uncover how content words—nouns, verbs, adjectives—gradually become abstract grammatical tools. Grammaticalisation is the process where independent words lose their autonomy and become auxiliaries, modals, or affixes. Latin provides clear examples. The verb habere, meaning 'to have', eventually became a future marker in French, as in j'aurai ('I will have'). This shift reflects a change not just in form but in function. The verb stopped pointing to possession and started pointing to time. Over centuries, these shifts create

[134] Eckardt, R. (2006) Grammaticalization and Semantic Reanalysis. Mouton de Gruyter.

systems where once-independent terms now support the grammatical skeleton of the language. Christian Lehmann's theory helps explain how these transformations occur. He identifies three parameters that change during grammaticalisation: weight, cohesion, and variability. As a word becomes grammaticalised, it becomes lighter in meaning, more bound to other elements, and less flexible in use. It travels a one-way path from concrete expression to abstract structure. This idea of unidirectionality—that words go from lexical to grammatical but not the other way around—has shaped much of modern grammaticalisation theory. But Eckardt focuses on something more specific: semantic reanalysis. While many theories focus on sound or syntax, she argues that meaning is often the key driver. Changes in word meaning allow shifts in function. A good example is the English verb 'go', which now marks future tense in phrases like 'going to leave'. This was not simply a metaphorical stretch. Instead, speakers reanalysed the verb's meaning and role in the sentence, allowing it to serve a new grammatical purpose. What makes Eckardt's view compelling is her idea that grammaticalisation is not just one process—it is a conspiracy of changes. Phonological shifts, syntactic patterns, and semantic reinterpretations work together, often invisibly, to reshape how language operates. A word might change its position in a sentence, lose part of its sound, and gain a new, more abstract meaning—all in the same historical breath. These changes seem gradual, but Eckardt warns that this is only how they appear. In practice, they often happen in discrete steps. A word retains its old use for a long time, then suddenly picks up a new grammatical function. From the outside, it looks like a slow fade. Inside the system, it is a snap. Grammaticalisation also gives rise to new expressions that do not quite fit anywhere. These might become discourse markers or peripheral grammatical elements, like 'well' or 'you know'. Such forms often come from familiar words that shift meaning through context until they perform a new role. Again, semantic reanalysis plays a central part. Eckardt's conclusion is that grammaticalisation is not about erosion or loss. It is about how meaning changes structure. The transformation of words into grammar is not a breakdown, but a reconfiguration. Grammar, in this view, is not a static system but a living result of change across many levels of language.

Semantic bleaching

Grammaticalisation is a process where words once used for concrete meaning evolve into elements of grammar. This shift often strips words of their specific content, leaving behind a more abstract function. In her work 'Grammaticalisation and Semantic Bleaching[135]', Eve E. Sweetser explores how grammaticalisation leads to what linguists call semantic bleaching—the weakening or fading of a word's original meaning as it takes on a grammatical role. This process can be seen in many familiar words. Take 'awfully' and 'terribly', for example. These words once conveyed feelings of awe or terror. Today, they are mostly used for emphasis, as in 'awfully good' or 'terribly nice', with little connection to their emotional roots. Their original force has faded. They now serve as intensifiers, highlighting other words rather than standing on their own. Sweetser explains that grammaticalisation does not always mean total loss of meaning. Instead, it often involves a shift. A word's meaning becomes more general or abstract. The verb 'got' is a useful example. It used to mean 'to obtain' or 'to possess'. In phrases like 'have got', it now functions as a marker of possession, but the idea of obtaining something has mostly disappeared. It has become part of a fixed expression. This is a classic case of semantic bleaching—'got' remains in the sentence, but its original meaning has been pushed aside. This

[135] Sweetser, E.E. (1988). Grammaticalization and Semantic Bleaching. Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society, 14, p.389. doi:https://doi.org/10.3765/bls.v14i0.1774.

shift happens gradually but firmly. Words that start out as rich in meaning are used again in specific contexts. Over time, people stop thinking about the original meaning and begin using the word as a grammatical tool. Sweetser stresses that these changes are not random. They follow certain patterns. Frequently used words, especially in spoken language, are more likely to undergo bleaching because of repetition and familiarity. Another good example is the word 'love'. In the past, 'love' referred to a powerful emotion directed toward people. Today, people often say they 'love' pizza or a TV show. This broad use dilutes the intensity of the word. As Dan Jurafsky has noted, 'love' has shifted from an emotional state to a general marker of approval or enjoyment. This is a form of semantic bleaching, where the original emotional depth is replaced by something lighter and more flexible. Sweetser points out that what is often called 'semantic loss' might be better understood as a redistribution of meaning. The original content is not necessarily destroyed; it is just moved or transformed. Words take on new roles as part of the language system. Their old meanings may still exist in some contexts, but the main use has shifted toward grammar or abstraction. This view helps explain why language remains fluid and adaptable. It is not that people are misusing words or corrupting language. Instead, the structure of language itself encourages these shifts. As speakers use language to express more subtle or complex ideas, they push the boundaries of meaning. Old words take on new life in new grammatical roles. The shift is not always welcomed. Some see the bleached use of words like 'literally' or 'awesome' as signs of linguistic decay. But Sweetser's view, along with that of other linguists, suggests a more neutral perspective. These changes are a natural part of how language works. Bleaching may weaken a word's original meaning, but it also opens new ways of expression. Language loses some precision but gains flexibility. In short, grammaticalisation shows how words evolve from meaning to structure. Semantic bleaching is part of that evolution. Words like 'awfully', 'love', and 'got' no longer carry their original meanings, but they play important roles in modern speech. This transformation reveals the adaptability of human language, allowing words to shift and expand beyond their original contexts. Yet in the process, the personal experiences that once gave them life are erased, leaving only bleached shells repurposed as empty slogans in the industry of language.

6.2. Lexical nonsense

(When structure speaks: How nonsense becomes a pattern)

'He may look like an idiot and talk like an idiot but do not let that fool you. He really is an idiot'.

Groucho Marx

'If the texts seem incomprehensible, it is for the excellent reason that they mean precisely nothing'.

—Alan Sokal, Fashionable Nonsense

Lexical nonsense and morphological sense

The idea that form and meaning in language are inseparable has long shaped linguistic thinking. Martin Maiden's 'Lexical Nonsense and Morphological Sense [136]' questions this assumption. Maiden argues that morphology—specifically lexical formatives—can operate independently of semantic content. His work focuses on the ways that abstract word structures influence language change, even when stripped of clear lexical or grammatical meaning. One of the key insights from Maiden's research is that morphology can remain active in language even when its connection to meaning is lost or obscured. This challenges the belief that all morphological changes are driven by semantic needs. Instead, Maiden shows how certain structures—what linguist Mark Aronoff calls 'morphomes'—function as formal patterns within language, not tied to meaning or phonetics. These morphomes help explain the persistence of irregular inflectional patterns in verbs like 'sing', 'sang', and 'sung', or 'go', 'went', and 'gone', which are not motivated by meaning but by entrenched morphological distribution. Maiden's examples from Romance languages demonstrate that these morphomic patterns often resist analogical change. For instance, Latin verbs related to 'dare' (to give) and 'donare' (to bestow) interact in ways that defy simple meaning-based explanations. Over time, their forms shift in response to distributional pressure from morphological patterns rather than semantic clarity. This suggests that speakers unconsciously respect certain abstract patterns, even when the original meanings are forgotten or merged. One of the most vivid illustrations of this morphological autonomy is folk etymology. Traditionally, folk etymology is seen as a process where speakers reshape unfamiliar words into forms that appear meaningful. However, Maiden proposes a more structural explanation. He argues that speakers often reanalyse unfamiliar words not because they seek meaning, but because they are driven by formal resemblance. This is how 'beaupré' in French, originally a nautical term, came to be understood as 'beau' (beautiful) and 'pré' (meadow), despite the mismatch in meaning. The appeal lies not in logic but in the illusion of internal structure. These restructurings reveal how speakers project known morphological elements onto unfamiliar forms. The result may be semantically absurd, like 'butterfly', which has no connection to butter or flies, yet it feels morphologically sound. This need for structural familiarity helps drive language change even when meaning lags or gets distorted in the process. Maiden also points to cases where homophony leads to unexpected reanalysis. Words that sound the same but have unrelated meanings—like 'berry' and 'donkey' in some dialects—can be treated as morphologically related. Over time, one form may replace another, not because of shared meaning, but because they are processed as structurally identical. This highlights how language users often prioritise form over content in ways that reshape the lexicon itself. What emerges from Maiden's work is a vision of language where morphology has a life of its own. Far from being merely a vessel for meaning, morphological form can guide language evolution on its own terms. It creates patterns, resists change and invites reinterpretation. Even nonsense—when structured morphologically—can gain traction and influence how languages develop. This has wide implications for how historical linguists understand change. It means that not all linguistic evolution is driven by communicative clarity or semantic need. Sometimes, it is the shape of words—their endings, their syllable patterns, their resemblance to familiar forms—that carries the weight. And in doing so, it reveals a layer of language that is structured, rule-governed, and autonomous.

[136] Maiden, M. (2012) 'Lexical Nonsense and Morphological Sense: On the Real Importance of "Folk Etymology" and Related Phenomena for Historical Linguists', in Eythórsson, T. (ed.) The Rosendal Papers. Oslo: Novus Press.

Fashionable nonsense

In 'Fashionable Nonsense[137]', Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont launch a sharp critique of how certain postmodern thinkers have misappropriated scientific concepts. The book grew out of Sokal's infamous hoax, in which he submitted a deliberately nonsensical article—rich in scientific jargon but devoid of actual meaning—to a respected cultural studies journal. That the article was accepted and published was not, as the authors argue, merely an editorial oversight but a symptom of a deeper intellectual malaise. The hoax served to highlight a widespread pattern among some theorists: dressing up incoherent ideas in the trappings of science to lend them authority. The book targets a group of well-known intellectuals—many of them French philosophers such as Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean Baudrillard—whose writings, according to Sokal and Bricmont, often use terms from mathematics and physics without understanding their meaning. The authors argue that such misuses are not isolated lapses but form a pattern of intellectual behaviour that devalues both science and critical reasoning. Their central concern is not to police disciplinary boundaries but to call out what they see as intellectual dishonesty. The issue is not the use of metaphor or cross-disciplinary thinking per se, but the absence of substance behind the scientific language. For Sokal and Bricmont, the damage lies in the erosion of standards. When obscure language is mistaken for profundity, the ability to distinguish genuine insight from empty rhetoric diminishes. Scientific terms like 'non-linearity', 'topology', or 'quantum gravity' are often dropped into texts without explanation or justification. In some cases, these concepts are misrepresented so badly that their original scientific meaning is lost entirely. The authors stress that this is not poetic license or creative analogy—it is a deliberate attempt to impress or obscure. The book responds to several common objections. One is that the quoted passages are cherry-picked or peripheral to the author's main work. But Sokal and Bricmont counter that even marginal claims reflect broader attitudes toward truth and knowledge. If a thinker is careless with scientific references, what does that imply about the rest of their reasoning? Another defence is that the authors are taking metaphors too literally. Yet metaphors, they argue, should clarify thought, not mask confusion. When metaphors rely on complex scientific theories that are poorly understood, they do more harm than good. Sokal and Bricmont also reject the claim that they are waging an ideological or political attack. They clarify that their critique is neither anti-French nor anti-leftist. Their concern is not political alignment but intellectual integrity. Postmodernism, in their view, often confuses scepticism about scientific authority with a rejection of science itself. This scepticism, when taken too far, becomes a form of relativism that undermines the very idea of evidence and argument. The authors admit that postmodernism is not the greatest threat facing society. Religious extremism and authoritarian ideologies are far more dangerous. However, they argue that the spread of anti-rational thinking within academia has long-term cultural consequences. If knowledge becomes just another discourse and reason is seen as a tool of domination, then public trust in science and rational debate may erode. Their final chapters call for a real dialogue between the sciences and the humanities—one based on mutual respect, not mystification. They argue for the importance of understanding scientific ideas before applying them elsewhere. Science is not just another language; it has rules, constraints, and empirical grounding. Misusing it does not enrich humanistic inquiry but impoverishes it. The challenge is not to draw boundaries between disciplines but to ensure that interdisciplinary work is conducted with care, humility, and honesty. 'Fashionable Nonsense' is a passionate defence of rational inquiry. It urges readers to

[137] Sokal, A. and Bricmont, J. (1998) Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science. New York: Picador.

be wary of intellectual performance that substitutes obscurity for insight. While Sokal and Bricmont's tone can be unforgiving, their aim is not to silence critical voices but to uphold the standards that make meaningful dialogue possible. For them, science and reason are not merely cultural products but hard-won tools of understanding that deserve careful use and deep respect.

Non-Euclidean scientific language

In 'Fashionable Nonsense', Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont examine the intellectual drift that led to the rise of postmodern relativism and the misuse of scientific language in the humanities and social sciences. They trace this development not to a single source but to a combination of cultural and institutional habits that eroded the value of empirical thinking. Their argument is not just an attack on philosophy or theory but a defence of intellectual honesty and clarity. One contributing factor is the neglect of empirical grounding in theory. Science is often misunderstood as a rigid machine for turning facts into laws, but it depends on a subtle back-and-forth between observation and theory. However, when empirical verification is dismissed, any internally consistent narrative can appear 'scientific'. This opens the door for elegant-sounding theories that are never tested against reality, theories which use mathematical language or borrowed technical concepts to give a veneer of seriousness without any real content. Another major source of confusion comes from what the authors call 'scientism' in the social sciences. Here, science is mistakenly reduced to simplified models, leading to failed attempts to treat society with formulas borrowed from physics or biology. When these projects collapsed, many scholars rejected science itself, turning instead to radical anti-scientific positions. Postmodernism gained ground during this retreat, positioning itself as an alternative to failed scientific models while also abandoning the demand for evidence or consistency. This rejection coincided with the natural sciences' overwhelming cultural prestige. The successes of physics and biology in the twentieth century were so compelling that everyone wanted to borrow their language. But this admiration often led to misuse. Philosophers and theorists began dropping terms like 'quantum mechanics', 'non-Euclidean geometry', or 'chaos theory' into their texts without understanding them. Sokal and Bricmont argue that no physicist forced Jacques Lacan or Julia Kristeva to misuse such terms—they did so voluntarily, often for rhetorical effect rather than intellectual insight. Postmodernism also borrowed from anthropology's legitimate use of cultural relativism. Anthropologists avoid judging other cultures by their own standards, which is useful in fieldwork. But this methodological caution was distorted into a cognitive relativism that holds all truths as culturally equal. In this view, creation myths and archaeological evidence are simply different ways of explaining the world. Such flattening of knowledge erases the distinction between tested theories and untested beliefs. Many of the thinkers criticised by Sokal and Bricmont also emerged from traditions that prized philosophical speculation and literary style over empirical rigor. These traditions provided intellectual tools to critique dominant ideologies, but they often blurred the line between poetic license and theoretical precision. The result is a landscape where metaphor replaces method, and obscurity is mistaken for depth. In conclusion, the rise of postmodern relativism and its disdain for scientific clarity can be traced to a convergence of misread scientific ambition, political disappointment, and cultural confusion. The authors do not claim that science can explain everything. Rather, they argue for a critical and informed dialogue between disciplines, one that respects the boundaries of specialised knowledge while remaining open to genuine interdisciplinary insight. The alternative is intellectual posturing that obscures meaning and disconnects academia from its responsibility to clarity and truth. The humanities, seduced by the prestige of science, built their own 'non-Euclidean' language—dense, metaphorical, and self-referential. Postmodern theorists repurposed scientific terms like 'chaos' or 'quantum' into

rhetorical devices, creating a linguistic chaos theory where meaning folded in on itself. What emerged was not insight but illusion: a system where obscurity masquerades as complexity and where intellectual rigor dissolves into stylistic performance detached from empirical accountability.

Linguistic obfuscation in fraudulent science

In their study 'Linguistic Obfuscation in Fraudulent Science[138]', David M. Markowitz and Jeffrey T. Hancock examine how language can be used to conceal fraud in scientific writing. By analysing a large corpus of over two million words, they compared papers retracted for fraudulent data with those that were not retracted or were retracted for non-fraudulent reasons. The key discovery was that fraudulent scientific papers consistently used more complex and difficult language. They were less readable, more abstract, and filled with technical jargon. This style of writing, the authors argue, is not accidental—it is a strategy used by deceptive researchers to hide misconduct behind a wall of linguistic complexity. The study suggests that linguistic obfuscation acts as a form of camouflage. Fraudulent scientists increase the density of references and technical language in their writing to make it harder for reviewers or readers to detect inconsistencies or question the data. Compared to unretracted papers or those withdrawn for other reasons, the fraudulent papers contained more causal language, more abstract terms, and fewer emotional expressions. This suggests that the goal is to make the paper appear scientific and rigorous while hiding the lack of real evidence. The more unreadable the paper, the harder it is to challenge. This tactic echoes earlier research in psychology and corporate communication. Liars, studies have shown, often avoid personal pronouns and use more abstract or causal language. In corporate fraud, deceptive financial reports also tend to be dense, filled with passive constructions and obscure terminology. Markowitz and Hancock extend this logic to science, arguing that fraudulent authors use obfuscation to confuse readers and to discourage scrutiny. The language serves not to communicate clearly but to mislead through form. The researchers collected data from PubMed archives spanning forty years, from 1973 to 2013. They isolated 315 retracted papers, with 253 withdrawn for fraud and sixty-two for other reasons. For comparison, they matched each retracted paper with an unretracted article from the same journal and year. In cases where exact matches were unavailable, they selected similar papers from adjacent years. The result was a dataset that allowed for a close analysis of linguistic patterns across fraudulent and legitimate scientific writing. To measure linguistic obfuscation, the authors used established tools such as LIWC and Coh-Metrix, which assess features like word complexity, sentence structure, emotional tone, and conceptual density. The authors created an obfuscation index, combining the frequency of jargon, causal terms, and abstraction, while penalising texts with higher readability and positive emotion words. The findings were clear: fraudulent papers scored higher on the obfuscation index than both unretracted and non-fraudulent retracted papers. They were more abstract, less emotionally expressive, and harder to understand. One notable pattern was the number of references included. Fraudulent papers averaged more citations than the control group. This strategy may serve to overwhelm the reader or to create an appearance of credibility through quantity rather than clarity. Referencing numerous sources can also discourage fact-checking, as each source takes time to verify. In this way, the illusion of thoroughness hides the absence of genuine substance. The study also attempted to predict fraudulent writing using linguistic features alone. Through cross-validation techniques, the authors found they could detect fraud with an

[138] Markowitz, D.M. and Hancock, J.T. (2015) 'Linguistic Obfuscation in Fraudulent Science', Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 34(4), pp. 343–357.

accuracy of just over 57 percent. While this is better than chance, it is not yet reliable enough to be used as a detection tool. However, the potential for using computational methods to identify suspicious writing styles is a promising area for future research. More refined models may help editors, reviewers, and institutions screen for fraud more effectively. Importantly, the authors examined whether these linguistic patterns varied across disciplines or regions. They found no significant correlation between obfuscation and scientific domain or geographic location. This suggests that the use of complex, unreadable language is a common feature of fraudulent writing across fields and cultures. The phenomenon is not confined to one area of science but reflects a broader strategy used by those who falsify data. This study builds on earlier work by the same authors, including a case study of the Dutch psychologist Diederik Stapel, who was found guilty of extensive data fabrication. That earlier research hinted at linguistic markers of deception but lacked statistical significance due to its smaller size. In contrast, the current study provides robust evidence that fraudulent science tends to be more difficult to read—not by accident, but by design. The broader implication is that language itself can serve as both a tool and a weapon in the construction of truth. When used ethically, scientific language clarifies, informs, and invites scrutiny. When misused, it becomes a smokescreen. Obfuscation shifts the burden of understanding from the author to the reader, often discouraging critical analysis and enabling deception to go undetected. Markowitz and Hancock's findings are part of a growing recognition that fraud in science is not just about data—it is also about discourse. Scientific misconduct is not always hidden in the numbers; sometimes, it is embedded in the words that frame those numbers. Understanding how language reveals or conceals truth is essential to safeguarding the integrity of research.

Misunderstanding of science

In 'Merchants of Doubt[139]', Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway reveal how a small group of scientists systematically worked to undermine public understanding of urgent scientific issues. Their book tells the story of how figures like Fred Seitz, Fred Singer, and others used their reputations to challenge established science, not by producing credible counter-evidence, but by manufacturing doubt. The story begins with Ben Santer, a climate scientist targeted in the 1990s after contributing to an IPCC report that concluded human activity was warming the planet. Santer’s work was solid, but his conclusions sparked immediate backlash from conservative think tanks and politically connected scientists. What happened to Santer was not unique. It followed a strategy developed during the tobacco wars, where industry-funded experts cast doubt on the link between smoking and cancer. These same individuals later appeared in debates over acid rain, the ozone hole, and climate change. The core tactic remained the same: confuse the public by questioning the science, suggesting uncertainty where little existed. Seitz and Singer, both physicists by training, had no expertise in environmental science, yet they positioned themselves as authorities and attacked consensus views. Their credibility was bolstered by affiliations with institutions like the George C. Marshall Institute, giving them a platform despite their lack of relevant research. The authors show how these scientists worked in tandem with corporate interests—particularly the fossil fuel and chemical industries—to delay regulation. One of the clearest examples is the fight over ozone depletion. In the 1970s, Sherwood Rowland and Mario Molina discovered that CFCs were eroding the ozone layer. Their research, supported by further studies from James Lovelock and Harold Johnston, was strong enough to prompt regulatory concern. But the chemical industry quickly responded by funding its own research and launching public relations campaigns to sow confusion.

[139] Oreskes, N. and Conway, E.M. (2010) Merchants of Doubt. New York: Bloomsbury Press.

Committees were formed, counter-experts were recruited, and doubts were strategically amplified. Despite these efforts, the scientific evidence mounted. Instruments were developed to detect chlorine compounds in the upper atmosphere, providing undeniable proof of human-caused ozone destruction. Regulatory agencies began responding. The public also acted, shifting to alternatives like roll-on deodorants. This culminated in the 1979 U.S. ban on CFC aerosols, showing that action could still be taken even in the face of strong corporate pushback. The book's core argument is that these campaigns were not merely intellectual disagreements but coordinated efforts to mislead. The scientists involved were not innocent contrarians; they were knowingly enabling industries to delay action on public health and environmental threats. The damage was real: lives were lost due to delayed tobacco regulations, ecosystems were harmed by acid rain, and climate change remains an unresolved crisis exacerbated by decades of strategic denial. 'Merchants of Doubt' is not just a history of deception—it is a warning. Scientific integrity can be undermined by a few loud voices when money and ideology are involved. Science has been systematically undermined when its findings threaten powerful interests. The issue is not whether science is right all the time—it is not—but how people misunderstand what science is. Many expect certainty, a final word. But science is not about absolute proof. It is about consensus drawn from repeated, careful observation, testing, and peer evaluation. This misunderstanding leaves space for those who wish to create doubt, especially when financial or political stakes are high. The metaphor Oreskes and Conway use—a banquet of industrial prosperity for which the bill has come due—is revealing. For over a century, society has enjoyed the benefits of fossil fuels, synthetic chemicals, and unregulated industry. But now, the consequences have become visible. Climate change, ozone depletion, and acid rain show that the cost of unchecked industrial activity is no longer theoretical. Yet many resist paying that bill. And in resisting, they question not only the data but the legitimacy of science itself. Much of this resistance has been driven by ideology, not by new discoveries. The ideological fears led to campaigns that tried to discredit the science by labelling it as politically motivated. People often misunderstand who counts as an expert. True scientific authority depends on specialisation and active engagement in research. Modern science is deeply collaborative. It relies on systems like peer review, institutional checks, and replication. It is through these systems—not individual voices—that consensus is reached. Consensus is not weakness; it is the strongest point science can offer. Science gives society the best available guidance for complex problems. In the end, Oreskes and Conway argue for a new understanding of science. Not as a search for perfect truth, but as a disciplined method for managing uncertainty. When the cost of delay is global—rising seas, disappearing ozone, degraded health—trusting that process becomes not only reasonable but necessary.

How words gain new roles

Semantic bleaching refers to the process by which words lose much of their original, specific meaning and take on more general or grammatical functions. It is a common and subtle part of how language evolves. Words that once carried strong, clear meanings gradually become abstract, vague, or purely functional. In the field of grammaticalisation, bleaching plays a central role. It is what allows content-heavy words to turn into auxiliary verbs, suffixes, or intensifiers that serve mostly structural or rhetorical purposes. Linguist James Matisoff described bleaching as the partial erasure of a word's features, making it better suited for use in grammar rather than meaning. John Haiman offered a similar account, noting that a bleached word expands its use across broader contexts, eventually drifting so far from its original meaning that it can function independently of it. Both scholars agree that semantic bleaching is often accompanied by phonetic reduction, though not always. Consider the suffix -ly in words

like 'happily' or 'quickly'. This form evolved from an old Proto-Germanic term that once meant 'body' or 'form'. Over time, that meaning disappeared. The suffix now has no trace of its origin and is treated purely as a grammatical device for forming adverbs. A similar story applies to -like in 'childlike' or 'ghostlike', which also originated from a word meaning 'body'. These examples show how a once meaningful term can become a structural element in modern speech, its semantic past all but erased. This process is especially common with intensifiers—words like 'very', 'really', 'literally', and 'ultimately'. 'Very' comes from the Latin verus, meaning 'true'. It once expressed truthfulness but is now used as a mere amplifier. In 'very tired' or 'very late', it adds force but no longer connects with truth in any literal sense. 'Really' has a similar history. It can still mean 'in reality', but more often it just adds emphasis or emotion. 'I really liked it' is more about tone than fact. 'Literally' is the most controversial example. Once used to mean 'in a literal manner', it is now often used for emphasis, even in figurative speech: 'I literally died laughing'. Here, its original meaning is not just ignored—it is contradicted. Yet this too is a form of semantic bleaching. The word becomes a rhetorical tool rather than a precise descriptor. Emotional words like 'love' have also undergone bleaching. Originally, 'love' implied deep affection or romantic feeling. But in everyday usage, people say they 'love' pizza or a TV show. The word has lost its exclusivity and depth, becoming a general expression of preference. Dan Jurafsky points out that this kind of semantic flattening is common with emotional or affective terms. Over time, they broaden and weaken in meaning, becoming more casual or structural in use. Even profanity undergoes bleaching. The word 'shit' once had a truly clear reference but is now used generically to mean 'things' or 'stuff'. In casual speech, someone might say 'Get your shit together' or 'I've got a lot of shit to do', without any literal reference to its original sense. The word has been bleached of its offensive force and now fills a grammatical slot for generality. However, it is not always accurate to say these words lose meaning entirely. Instead, many linguists argue that meaning is redistributed. A word sheds some of its original features and takes on new ones. It adapts. The meaning of 'literally', for example, still exists in certain contexts. What changes is how frequently and in what kinds of sentences it appears. Semantic bleaching does not erase meaning so much as shift it. This process can lead to the emergence of new forms and uses. A bleached word might begin to function as a suffix, auxiliary verb, or discourse marker. It may also become a placeholder, a way to pad speech or signal emotion. Though these roles may seem minor, they help language remain flexible and expressive. In the end, semantic bleaching reflects the dynamic nature of language. It shows how meaning is shaped by use, habit, and context. Words wear down, not from carelessness, but from constant, repeated use in diverse settings. And in doing so, they take on new grammatical lives, continuing to serve speakers in evolving ways.

Fuzzy Grammar

In 'Fuzzy Grammar: A Reader[140]', edited by Bas Aarts, the concept of fuzziness in grammatical categories challenges the traditional view that linguistic systems are strictly rule-bound and clear-cut. The book brings together philosophical, psychological, and linguistic perspectives to explore how language resists rigid categorisation. Rather than assuming words or grammatical forms fit neatly into defined categories like 'noun' or 'verb', the contributors examine how language often operates along a spectrum. Categories blend, overlap, and shift, depending on context, usage, and perception. The philosophical roots of fuzzy grammar begin with Aristotle's classical idea of categorisation, where things either belong to a category or they do not. This framework, reinforced by Frege's logic and the Law of the Excluded Middle, has

[140] Aarts, B. (ed.) (2004) Fuzzy Grammar: A Reader. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

long influenced how language has been modelled. However, critics have noted the limitations of this binary system. Bertrand Russell argued that vagueness stems not from things themselves but from the language used to describe them. Wittgenstein expanded this idea by introducing the concept of family resemblances—where category membership is based on shared traits that need not all be present in each instance. Not all games share a single defining feature, but they still fall under the concept of 'game'. In cognitive science, Eleanor Rosch's prototype theory provided an empirical basis for these insights. Rosch showed that people tend to classify items not by a strict checklist but by their resemblance to a typical example—a prototype. A robin is a more typical 'bird' than a penguin, even though both are birds. This idea helps explain why some grammatical categories feel 'fuzzier' than others. Some words straddle categories depending on how they are used, such as 'run' functioning as both a noun and a verb. Gradience is central to how people process and understand language, not just in semantics but also in grammar. The book explores how these ideas apply to traditional parts of speech. Early grammarians like Dionysius Thrax classified words according to their roles and meanings. But modern linguistics, especially influenced by John Anderson and Dwight Bolinger, recognises that grammatical categories like noun and verb have central and peripheral members. Some forms fit clearly, while others blur the lines. This blurriness is not a flaw, but a feature of how language evolves and adapts. Martin Joos, in contrast, argued for a strictly discrete approach. He saw language as a telegraphic system composed of fixed, combinable units—phonemes and morphemes—like Morse code. From this perspective, linguistics should strive for precision and avoid ambiguity. Joos likened linguistic analysis to map-making: the map may not be perfect, but its structure must be consistent. He believed the complexity of real-world meanings falls outside the domain of linguistics, which should focus on structural rules and combinations. However, this view limits how language is used and understood. Joos's discrete model struggles to account for the variability of human communication. Even seemingly rigid categories like singular and plural exhibit exceptions and contextual shifts. The idea that language can be described purely in binary terms ignores how people interpret meaning—especially in ambiguous or poetic contexts, where rules are stretched or ignored. Fuzzy grammar offers a more flexible alternative. It recognises that categorisation is a mental process shaped by cognitive constraints, cultural context, and communicative goals. Linguistic categories often exhibit degrees of membership, and speakers rely on context and experience to interpret meaning. This view aligns with Optimality Theory and other modern frameworks that treat grammar as a system of constraints rather than hard rules. 'Fuzzy Grammar' opens a necessary space in linguistic theory for uncertainty, gradience, and variability. Instead of forcing language into fixed categories, it acknowledges that grammar reflects the flexible and adaptive nature of thought itself. Joos's rigid model serves as a useful contrast, showing what is lost when language is treated as a purely logical system. By embracing the fuzzy edges of grammar, linguists can better capture the nonsense and obfuscation of human language.

6.3. The limits of words

(Structure without sense: When vocabulary fails human experience)

'Every word is a prejudice'.

– Friedrich Nietzsche

'Words do not express thoughts very well. They always become a little different immediately after they are expressed, a little distorted, a little foolish'.

– Hermann Hesse

The limits of language

R. M. W. Dixon opens his inquiry 'Are Some Languages Better Than Others?' with a warning. Throughout history, the comparison of languages has often sparked conflict. Linguistic pride and prejudice have played roles in colonialism, racism, and cultural domination. But Dixon's goal is not to rank languages in some hierarchy of worth; instead, he invites reflection on how well a language meets the communicative needs of its speakers. What does it mean to call a language 'better'? Is it clearer, more expressive, more logical, or easier to learn? These questions are less about superiority and more about function. The limits of language are not merely technical but cultural. While many linguists say all languages can express the same thoughts, Dixon challenges this. He explains that what must be said in a language—its obligatory grammatical structures—shapes thought in subtle ways. English requires speakers to choose between definite and indefinite articles. Other languages might demand tense, gender, evidentiality, or politeness forms. Jarawara, for instance, has three past tenses and marks whether the speaker personally witnessed an event. This differs significantly from English's simpler structure. Such requirements guide the speaker's attention and expectations. Beyond grammar, cultural differences in vocabulary illustrate how each language reflects the worldview of its users. Aboriginal Australian languages, for instance, often lack a word for 'chief' because traditional social structures did not include hierarchical leadership. Translating such a term from English implies a concept that simply did not exist. The same goes for words like 'symbol' or 'honesty'—terms that carry ideological or psychological baggage in Western thought but may not have direct equivalents in other cultures. The example of a 'moon plate' given as a symbolic gesture to an Aboriginal man, but received with confusion, underscores how language is embedded in cultural meaning. Despite the differences, all languages share a basic structure. Each has a lexicon—its vocabulary—and a grammar—the rules governing how those words are used. Grammar is often learnt unconsciously. Its complexity, however, is constrained by the limits of memory and processing. Irregularities, especially, burden the mind and reduce the room for other grammatical features. There is a practical balance between linguistic richness and cognitive load. Languages adapt over time to suit what people can handle mentally and socially. Vocabulary size is another measure of linguistic potential. Larger societies develop specialised terms for law, medicine, technology, and art. Yet even smaller communities maintain a dense web of words for flora, fauna, and social life. While English has over 275,000 dictionary entries, most people use far fewer. A core vocabulary of 1,500–2,000 words suffices for basic conversation, with the rest serving specialised or poetic functions. Dixon also reflects on bilingualism and linguistic versatility. The myth that the brain can only manage one language is unfounded. In fact, learning multiple languages often sharpens one's awareness of grammar and meaning. Some societies maintain diglossia, using different language varieties for different contexts. Others rotate between languages depending on domain or audience. But even as languages vary and people switch between them, the total complexity any speaker can manage remains limited. From these reflections, Dixon sketches a vision of the 'ideal' language. It would include necessary grammatical tools—three tenses, multiple genders, and six or more cases—but avoid redundancy or excessive irregularity. It should use consistent sounds and predictable word structures. An ideal language would not rely too much on tone or word order and would keep homonyms to a minimum. It would distinguish clearly between actions and results, processes

and objects, kinship, and status. Yet no language achieves this ideal fully. Most carry the scars of history and culture, shaped by time and accident as much as design. An ideal language remains a thought experiment, a mirror to better understand how real languages work—and sometimes fail. The point is not to promote one tongue over another but to understand how structure influences expression and how expression shapes thought. Dixon's work reframes the question of whether some languages are better. The real issue is how languages balance function, complexity, and clarity. Each reflects the needs and limits of its community. No language is perfect, but all are rich in their own way. The ideal language is not a goal to reach but a lens to examine what people value, how they organise knowledge, and how they navigate the world through speech. In this sense, the limits of a language are the limits of its people's shared experience and imagination. Language can be seen as reflection of human constraint.

Are some languages better than others?

Language has often been a source of pride, conflict, and misunderstanding. In 'Are Some Languages Better Than Others?[141]', R. M. W. Dixon takes on this sensitive topic with care and clarity. He warns that comparisons between languages have historically fuelled prejudice and colonial superiority. Yet Dixon insists that, if approached scientifically, one can assess certain strengths or efficiencies in languages without declaring any language inherently superior. The key is understanding what 'better' means in each context. Dixon begins by emphasising that all human languages are complex systems developed to meet specific social needs. No language is primitive in structure, even if it lacks a writing system or global recognition. Every language, from English to Dyirbal, from Hua to Jarawara, has its own ways of encoding reality, shaped by its speakers' environment, culture, and history. What makes a language 'better', then, depends on the specific social, emotional, or functional tasks it is expected to perform. Languages fulfil many roles. They mark identity, coordinate action, express emotion, and convey information. Dixon shows how languages adapt to these roles differently. For instance, some languages require speakers to include detailed spatial or evidential information, like whether an event was seen or heard about. Others are more flexible in how much information must be encoded. This does not make one better than another, but it shows the variability in what each language demands from its speakers. One of Dixon's strongest arguments is against the assumption that written languages are superior to spoken ones. Writing is a recent invention compared to the vast timespan of spoken language. Oral traditions often preserve history, law, and poetry with incredible fidelity. Societies without writing rely on memory and storytelling in ways that develop different kinds of intellectual rigour. Writing, for all its advantages, can distance people from memory and oral reasoning. Dixon also discusses how languages shape thought through grammar and vocabulary. The division between lexicon (vocabulary) and grammar (structural rules) varies across languages. Some languages demand distinctions that others do not. English, for example, requires pluralisation; Dyirbal does not. Jarawara marks tense with additional requirements, such as gender and the reliability of the information. These features create unique pressures and affordances in communication. Phonology—the system of sounds—is another area where languages differ. Some languages have more sounds and shorter words; others have fewer sounds and longer words. Tone languages use pitch to change meaning, making communication more efficient in some ways. Still, these differences are not about superiority, but adaptation to social and environmental needs. Dixon highlights that languages also differ in how they manage ambiguity. Homonyms and synonyms complicate meaning but also enrich communication. English, for example, contains many homonyms like 'bank', which can refer to

[141] Dixon, R. M. W. (2016) Are Some Languages Better Than Others? Oxford: Oxford University Press.

a riverbank or a financial institution. It also has many synonyms due to its mixed linguistic heritage. This can add nuance but also cause confusion. Languages like Yidiñ avoid repetition with synonyms tailored for discourse rhythm and variation, a feature that can enhance storytelling and social interaction. Dixon further explores how words are classified. While English has clear distinctions between nouns, verbs, and adjectives, other languages blur these lines. In Dyirbal, words often shift between categories based on use. This grammatical flexibility allows for creativity but can also pose challenges for learners and translators. Finally, Dixon discusses how vocabulary size reflects cultural and environmental needs. While English has over 275,000 entries in the Oxford English Dictionary, everyday communication relies on far fewer. Smaller languages, especially those spoken by isolated groups, may function effectively with only 5,000 to 10,000 words. These languages are not deficient; they are precisely tuned to the lives of their speakers. When needed, they can invent or borrow words to adapt. Dixon's central claim is that all languages are equally human, equally expressive, and equally capable of change. The idea of one language being better than another is only meaningful in narrow, practical terms—such as efficiency for a specific task or adaptability to a new domain. Even then, such judgments must be made with caution and respect for linguistic diversity. Language is not just a tool for communication. It is a mirror of the world, shaped by the beliefs, relationships, and needs of its speakers. Dixon's work reminds readers that understanding languages requires both scientific rigour and cultural sensitivity. The richness of language lies not in hierarchy, but in the remarkable variety of ways humans make sense of their lives through words.

What is a word?

In 'Word: A Cross-Linguistic Typology[142]', R. M. W. Dixon and Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald examine the simple but deeply complex question: what is a word? Though the concept feels familiar in languages like English, its definition becomes much less clear when considered across the wide diversity of human languages. The book challenges the assumption that 'word' is a universal linguistic unit, revealing that the features used to define it often vary significantly from one language to another. Historically, many linguists assumed that words were the basic building blocks of language. This view shaped the study of grammar and lexicon in many European languages. But Dixon and Aikhenvald show how such assumptions can mislead when applied cross-linguistically. Some languages, especially those that are polysynthetic or strongly agglutinative, organise meaning and grammatical structure in ways that blur the lines between word, phrase, and morpheme. One problem is that 'word' can mean different things depending on whether one is focused on phonology or grammar. Phonological words are identified by sound patterns, such as stress placement or phonological rules. Grammatical words, by contrast, are defined by syntactic and morphological rules—how elements relate to one another within a sentence. In some languages, these two definitions coincide neatly. In others, they do not. A grammatical word may be made up of multiple phonological words, or a single phonological word might contain more than one grammatical element. Take clitics, for example. These are short grammatical units that cannot stand alone but must attach to a host. Clitics behave like grammatical words in terms of meaning and syntax, but they do not satisfy the conditions of phonological independence. In languages like Yidiñ or Tariana, clitics reveal how fluid the boundary can be between independent words and bound elements. They force linguists to ask whether the concept of the word is still useful if it cannot

[142] Dixon, R. M. W. and Aikhenvald, A. Y. (2002) Word: A Cross-Linguistic Typology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

consistently be defined. The book surveys a wide range of languages—African, Australian, Native American, Caucasian, and even sign languages—to show how the notion of 'word' must adapt to typological variation. In some languages, particularly isolating ones like Vietnamese or Yoruba, words tend to be short and monomorphemic, aligning with Western ideas of what a word is. In others, such as many Indigenous languages of the Americas, a single 'word' might contain what would be an entire sentence in English. Here, the line between morphology and syntax becomes especially blurry. Earlier thinkers like Sapir and Bloomfield offered definitions of the word that were elegant but too narrow. Bloomfield called the word a 'minimum free form', meaning the smallest segment of speech that can stand alone. But this definition fails when applied to languages where bound forms carry essential grammatical meaning, or where words are tightly fused from multiple parts. Sapir's idea of a word as a 'satisfying bit of meaning' sounds intuitive but lacks any clear criteria. Dixon and Aikhenvald argue that a single, rigid definition of 'word' is unworkable. Instead, they propose a typological framework that considers multiple dimensions—phonological, grammatical, syntactic, and semantic. Under this model, each language must be analysed on its own terms, identifying how it distinguishes (or does not) between levels of linguistic structure. For example, Northern Sotho has grammatical words that are composed of smaller phonological parts, challenging the Western intuition that words are always phonologically unified. A central insight from the book is that many languages do not have a native term for 'word'. This does not mean they lack words; rather, it suggests that the linguistic units we take for granted may not be universally salient. This raises further questions: are words real units in the cognitive structure of all speakers, or are they artefacts of how certain languages have been described? The implications of this work go beyond theoretical interest. Understanding how different languages conceptualise and structure words informs how linguists do fieldwork, write grammars, and translate texts. It also shapes how languages are taught and preserved, especially when many of the world's languages face extinction. In the end, the idea of the word remains useful, but only when treated with care. Words are not uniform entities across human speech. They are shaped by the structures and habits of the languages in which they exist. What counts as a word in English may not apply in Warlpiri or Inuktitut. Recognising this diversity reminds linguists that understanding has limits, and when they cross the border of language itself, they enter a no man's land where certainty fades.

The problem of the word

The question of what counts as a word continues to puzzle linguists. In 'The Problem of the Word[143]' P. H. Matthews examines this problem by comparing how different languages treat the concept and how definitions shift depending on grammatical traditions and structural features. While some languages make it easy to identify words, others blur the lines between words, affixes, and clitics, making any universal theory difficult to apply. In Ancient Greek, the idea of a word was not very problematic. Linguists recognised forms like enclitics—short elements that lean on other words for pronunciation—as words. This clarity came from how the language structured grammar and syntax. Similarly, in Latin, words were treated as clearly defined grammatical units, typically consisting of a root and its inflectional endings. Parts of speech were well established, and words were the basic building blocks of sentences. However, the situation becomes more complex in modern languages like Georgian and Modern Greek. While Georgian, as described by linguist Alice Harris, offers clear word boundaries, Modern Greek complicates the picture. Clitics in Modern Greek—short forms like 'ton' meaning 'him'—

[143] Matthews, P. H. (1991) The Problem of the Word. In: Dixon, R. M. W. and Aikhenvald, A. Y. (eds) Word: A Cross-Linguistic Typology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

behave in ways that make it hard to tell whether they are separate words or part of a larger word. They occupy a space between affixes and independent words. This ambiguity is typical of many languages, not just Greek, and challenges any strict classification. Matthews notes that older grammatical traditions—especially those rooted in Greek and Latin—strongly shaped the modern understanding of words. These traditions assumed that words could always be clearly defined and that their boundaries were stable. But as linguistics has expanded to include a wider range of languages, those assumptions have often proved inadequate. In languages with complex morphology or unusual syntax, the traditional categories do not always hold up. For example, in Siouan languages of North America, the distinction between clitics and affixes is very blurred. Elements that seem to behave like affixes in one context might appear more like independent words in another. This inconsistency suggests that the labels 'word', 'affix', and 'clitic' might not correspond to fixed realities in language but are instead useful approximations that vary depending on the case. The concept of a clitic itself is central to this debate. It refers to a unit that lacks full phonological independence but carries grammatical meaning. In some languages, clitics attach to words like suffixes, while in others they float between words or shift positions in the sentence. Their behaviour resists easy classification, and Matthews argues that this makes them an ideal lens through which to study the broader ambiguity of the word as a linguistic unit. The key issue is that linguistic units often overlap. A clitic might look like an affix but behave like a word. A word might be phonologically independent but grammatically dependent. This fluidity is especially apparent when comparing languages from different families or structural types. Analytic languages like Vietnamese or Yoruba show a clear preference for short, distinct forms that look like words. Polysynthetic languages, on the other hand, may bundle entire sentences into a single complex word. Matthews concludes that while 'word' remains a useful concept, it cannot be defined in a way that fits every language. Instead of searching for one definition, linguists should accept that different languages require different criteria. Some definitions will be based on phonology, others on grammar, and still others on how speakers themselves treat the elements of speech. Words are real but not universally defined. They must be understood within the framework of each language, not forced into a single mould.

Making new words

In 'Making New Words[144]', R. M. W. Dixon offers a thorough account of how the English language forms new words through morphological derivation. This process involves the attachment of prefixes and suffixes to existing roots, which can shift both the meaning and grammatical category of a word. Dixon identifies around two hundred productive derivational affixes in English—approximately ninety prefixes and 110 suffixes. These affixes work systematically, allowing speakers to generate new vocabulary without needing prior exposure to each specific term. Dixon begins by classifying English words into three major open classes—nouns, verbs, and adjectives—and one smaller class, adverbs. These categories are particularly responsive to derivational changes. For example, adding the suffix -ness to adjectives yields abstract nouns such as kindness. Attaching -ize to a noun can form a verb like dramatize, while -ive makes adjectives from verbs, as seen in responsive. The suffix -ly changes adjectives into adverbs, as in quickly. Prefixes operate differently; inter-, for instance, can be added across classes, generating words such as interact, international, and interpersonal. Beyond affixation, Dixon discusses compounding, which combines two or more roots.

[144] Dixon, R. M. W. (2014) Making New Words: Morphological Derivation in English. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Compounds may come from identical or different word classes. Some are semantically transparent, like wheelchair, while others are idiomatic or metaphorical, like cold-shoulder. The meaning of a compound is not always deducible from its parts. This inconsistency makes compounds less predictable and less productive than affixes, which follow more regular patterns. Dixon also explores the nuances of affixes with similar functions but different origins. Negative prefixes like un- and in- are a case in point. Un- is usually paired with native English words, while in- tends to combine with words of Latin origin. Compare unlucky with invisible. These patterns reflect deep historical roots, with un- deriving from Old English and in- from Latin. Such distinctions persist despite centuries of linguistic evolution, showing how language remembers its past. The book traces the etymology of affixes to show how they shift in function and meaning over time. For instance, the suffix -ness has Old English origins but was later applied to French borrowings like rudeness. Similarly, -ish stems from Germanic sources and is used to create adjectives like foolish or greenish, suggesting resemblance or tendency. Some affixes change a word's phonological form as well, -ous transforms danger into dangerous, often altering stress or vowel quality in the process. Dixon also tackles the productivity of affixes. Some, like -er for agent nouns (runner, baker), are widely used, while others have declined in frequency. The suffix -acy, once used in democracy and autocracy, is now largely replaced by -ness. Productivity is influenced by semantic transparency, sound compatibility, and competition between affixes. Over time, affixes that are simpler or clearer tend to dominate. Form and fusion are also addressed. Some affixes attach cleanly without changing the root, such as -ness in darkness. Others blend with the base, leading to new phonetic forms, as seen in information or employment. These changes reflect natural phonological processes as well as the cognitive drive for efficiency and recognisability. The second part of the book shifts to the broader significance of word formation. Language is not just a system for transmitting facts; it also shapes social relations, emotions, and identity. The proverb 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me' is dismissed as misleading. Words can leave lasting scars. A cruel remark may echo in someone's mind long after physical wounds have healed. Words carry weight. A simple word like word can refer to speech, promise, or sacred text. It appears in phrases like keep your word, word of mouth, or the Word of God. Special words, such as passwords, still hold power today, unlocking everything from bank accounts to private lives. English, with its flexible grammar and minimal inflection, allows many lexemes to serve multiple roles. Words can easily shift from noun to verb without modification. A term like Google started as a proper noun and quickly became a verb. These 'double-duty' words increase expressive power but also bring ambiguity. Headlines like 'Royal witnesses cheat' illustrate how word class ambiguity can cloud meaning. As Old English lost its inflectional endings, reliance on word order increased. In place of case markers, Modern English leans on syntax and word position to convey meaning. This simplification comes with trade-offs. While easier to learn and more efficient in some ways, it risks reduced clarity and increased ambiguity. Dixon concludes that language must strike a balance. Too much rigidity stifles expression. Too much flexibility creates confusion. English continues to evolve, with its derivational affixes serving as engines of lexical creativity. These affixes make the language vibrant and adaptable, helping it respond to cultural, social, and technological change.

Planned inequality of standard language

Language seems like a neutral tool—something used to communicate, nothing more. But the moment certain ways of speaking are deemed 'correct' and others 'improper', that tool becomes a structure of power. The standardisation of language, while often framed as a practical or even progressive project, has always been tied to the maintenance of inequality. Standard

language does not just facilitate understanding; it draws borders, ranking people by how closely they align with a privileged linguistic form. What has considered standard is rarely chosen for its clarity or beauty. Instead, it reflects the dialect of those already in power—administrators, academics, ruling classes. Over time, their way of speaking gets codified in grammar books, taught in schools, and held up as the proper way to talk. Other dialects, even when logical and expressive, are pushed to the margins. This is not about linguistic merit; it is about control. Imagine two children growing up speaking different dialects. One's home language mirrors what is in the textbooks. From the first day of school, one feels affirmed; the other is corrected. This simple divergence grows into something structural. Standard language becomes the ticket to opportunity—jobs, degrees, respect—while the other dialect becomes a barrier, wrongly labelled as lazy or uneducated. Even the idea of 'bad grammar' is loaded. Consider phrases like 'ain't' or 'he be working'. They follow consistent rules in the dialects they come from. But they are judged as wrong because they do not conform to the standard. These judgments are not really about grammar—they are about social class, race, and access. Linguistic prescriptivism, the belief that there is one correct way to speak or write, often hides behind claims of professionalism or clarity. But clarity is contextual. What is clear and natural in one community may seem stilted or unfamiliar in another. The imposition of a single standard flattens this diversity. It enforces sameness and penalises difference. There is a long history of states using standard language as a tool of unification—or, more accurately, domination. From France's Académie Française to the grammar reforms in post-independence Norway, language has been used to define citizenship, erase minority identities, and centralise control. These processes were not driven by linguistic necessity but by political ambition. Of course, having a standard form of language can be useful—for legal documents, education, or media. The problem arises when the standard is elevated to the only acceptable form, and all others are ridiculed or excluded. That turns language from a bridge into a wall. Linguistic equality does not mean abandoning standard language altogether. It means loosening its grip. It means teaching standard forms without shaming others. It means valuing what people bring from their homes and communities, not treating it as something to be corrected. Because when language becomes a way to sort people into worth and unworthiness, it stops being communication—and becomes coercion.

The rise and fall of languages

R. M. W. Dixon's 'The Rise and Fall of Languages[145]' puts forward a compelling theory of how languages change—not as a slow, steady drift, but in bursts of sudden transformation. Drawing on analogies from evolutionary biology, particularly the idea of punctuated equilibrium, Dixon suggests that languages evolve in long stretches of relative stability, interrupted by short, intense periods of dramatic change. These disruptions are often caused by social, environmental, or technological upheaval. His model moves away from the traditional family tree approach and proposes a more dynamic view of linguistic history that better accounts for the complexity and instability of real-world language use. For most of human history, Dixon argues, languages remained in states of equilibrium. In such conditions, a group of neighbouring communities might each speak their own dialects or closely related languages, existing without any one becoming dominant. With no overarching prestige language, linguistic features diffused gradually across the region. People borrowed vocabulary and grammar from each other, resulting in a web of shared traits rather than clean divisions. The changes were modest—small shifts in pronunciation, word usage, or sentence structure. But then, something

[145] Dixon, R. M. W. (1997) The Rise and Fall of Languages. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

would break the balance. Natural disasters, the invention of agriculture, religious movements, technological change, or conquest could all trigger a rupture in this equilibrium. These moments of punctuation brought intense social reorganisation, and with it, language diversification. During such a phase, a single language might rapidly split into many new languages, or one dominant tongue could rise and displace others. Dixon suggests that this is how proto-languages—like Proto-Indo-European or Proto-Austronesian—formed: not through slow drift, but through the sudden reordering of previously diverse but balanced linguistic regions. Such historical punctuation events have often left behind little trace except in linguistic reconstructions. Dixon notes that modern attempts to draw neat family trees for languages can be misleading. The family tree model works only during brief windows of linguistic disruption. For most of human history, languages existed in dense networks of contact, blending features across boundaries. In these equilibrium phases, the diffusion of traits was more important than the divergence of branches. The recent past has witnessed one of the most dramatic punctuation events in linguistic history. European imperial expansion, the spread of world religions, and the rise of global capitalism all created enormous disruptions to local language ecologies. Writing systems and mass literacy, guns and ships, Christianity, and Islam—all became tools for linguistic domination. A small number of colonial languages rose to global prominence, while thousands of local languages fell into disuse or disappeared altogether. In many cases, the arrival of European linguists or missionaries marked not just the beginning of documentation but the end of equilibrium. Their presence changed the system they sought to describe. Dixon draws particular attention to Aboriginal Australia, where the linguistic situation remained remarkably stable for tens of thousands of years. This offers a rare example of long-term equilibrium—a complex region where multiple languages existed side by side without any single one becoming dominant. Only with European colonisation was this balance destroyed. In this sense, the Australian example allows Dixon to infer what ancient linguistic regions might have looked like before they were broken apart by migration, agriculture, or empire. The implications of this model are significant. If language development follows a pattern of equilibrium and punctuation, then modern linguists must be careful about how they interpret historical data. Many reconstructions based on the family tree model may oversimplify the past. The deeper patterns of diffusion and contact are often hidden beneath the surface, and the story they tell is more fluid and less hierarchical than traditional models suggest. At the same time, this theory highlights the urgent need to document endangered languages. With another punctuation still unfolding—driven by global media, digital technology, and economic migration—the linguistic equilibrium of our time is being violently disrupted. If linguists do not record the remnants of disappearing languages now, the traces may be lost forever. Language, like species, can flourish in stability and collapse in disruption. The rise and fall of languages, then, is not just a story of words but a history of humanity's changing ways of living together. Rising populations and increasing linguistic complexity can fuel obfuscation and semantic entropy, amplifying confusion and leading to greater miscommunication. This may also be a process of revitalising language through novelty, purchased at the price of meaning.

7. HYPERNORMALISATION

7.1. Distorted communication

(When words mislead: On the normality of miscommunication)

'Systematically distorted communication is communication which, although not consciously deceptive, systematically excludes certain experiences and views'.

— Jürgen Habermas, Communication, and the Evolution of Society

'Distorted communication masks ideological functions behind a veil of neutrality, making critique all the more urgent'.

— Jürgen Habermas, The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2

Normalisation of distortion

The concept of hypernormalisation, introduced by anthropologist Alexei Yurchak and expanded by filmmaker Adam Curtis, provides a powerful lens for understanding the collapse of truth and meaning in both authoritarian and democratic societies. In late Soviet life, people knew the system was broken, but lacking alternatives, they clung to its rituals and language. This widespread pretence hardened into reality, creating a condition where dysfunction became the accepted norm. Curtis extended this idea to the modern West, where governments, corporations, and media manufacture simplified versions of reality to maintain order, even as that order frays. Hypernormalisation names the moment when distortion no longer seems like distortion, but simply 'how things are'. This framework resonates deeply with Jürgen Habermas's theory of systematically distorted communication. Habermas argues that language itself can be corrupted in ways that make misunderstanding appear as understanding. Communication becomes hollow—filled with rehearsed phrases, ideological cues, and emotional defences—so that people think they are participating in meaningful dialogue when they are not. Over time, these patterns solidify into the very structure of public speech, excluding alternative perspectives not by censorship but through the internal logic of communication itself. In 'Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More', Alexei Yurchak described how Soviet citizens continued to repeat official slogans they no longer believed, not out of faith, but because there was no alternative language through which to live publicly. The performance of belief became more important than belief itself, creating a reality where everyone knew the system was hollow, yet still sustained it through ritualised speech. A similar dynamic unfolds today as people scroll past headlines about ecological collapse and mass suffering, only to be met with algorithmic trivia or celebrity gossip. This pattern is echoing the film 'Don't Look Up' (2021), where society chooses distraction over confrontation as a comet speeds toward Earth. The absurd political decision to 'not look up' captures the essence of hypernormalisation: a shared denial so deep that catastrophe is normalised and action abandoned. The emotional effects of this condition are profound. Digital anthropologist Rahaf Harfoush describes discovering hypernormalisation[146] as a moment of psychological relief. It confirmed her experience was not madness or paranoia, but a rational response to systemic unreality. As climate psychotherapist Caroline Hickman explains, what terrifies people most is not the collapse itself, but the realisation that those in power may no longer care whether society survives. In her words 'The worst thing in the world is to feel that you're the only one who feels this way and that you are going quietly mad and everyone else is in denial'. The result is not just anxiety or depression, but a deep sense of betrayal and confusion. Naming this experience—hypernormalisation—helps transform disorientation into understanding and understanding into the potential for resistance. Habermas, drawing from Freud, likens distorted communication to dreams, where underlying truths are compressed, displaced, or disguised.

[146] Matei, A. (2025). Systems are crumbling – but daily life continues. The dissonance is real. [online] the Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/wellness/ng-interactive/2025/may/22/hypernormalization-dysfunction-status-quo.

Public discourse functions, similarly, masking emotional or political contradictions beneath a surface of neutrality. In a hypernormalised society, language fails to reflect reality not just because of manipulation, but because its entire architecture has been warped. As Victor Klemperer noted in 'The Language of the Third Reich', even everyday words can become saturated with ideological residue, quietly shaping thought without notice. In such a context, Adam Curtis's 'fake world' is not a conspiracy—it is a shared hallucination maintained through language, habit, and silence. Hypernormalisation, then, is not simply a historical condition of late-Soviet collapse. It is a contemporary and ongoing threat, especially in the digital age, where algorithmic filters and endless content streams reinforce a sense of normalcy even as systems unravel. Recognising this helps people reframe their unease as insight. The goal is not to escape the distorted world entirely, but to puncture its illusions and recover the possibility of truth, mutual understanding, and ethical speech. Without such clarity, distortion will continue to pose as normality—closing off the imagination needed for genuine social and political transformation.

Systematically distorted communication

Jürgen Habermas's concept[147] of systematically distorted communication focuses on situations where understanding breaks down not due to unfamiliar words or concepts but because of deeper structural issues in how language is used. In these cases, participants might believe they are having a clear, meaningful exchange, but a closer look shows that real understanding is missing. This false appearance of communication is what Habermas refers to as pseudocommunication. Drawing on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, Habermas points to the ways that distortion in communication can become embedded in language itself. Freud saw dreams as examples of hidden meaning structured through condensation, displacement, and illogical grammar. Habermas applies this idea to social interaction. Just as a dream compresses or disguises its true content, so can public speech distort emotional or psychological truths. The result is language that fails to match internal thought or external action. Habermas identifies three levels where this distortion is visible. First, on the linguistic level, speech may break rules or rely on illogical patterns. Second, on the behavioural level, one sees repetition and rigidity that suggest unprocessed emotional content. Third, at the systemic level, the usual harmony between speech, gesture, and intention breaks down. These signs point to an internal conflict that has been pushed beneath conscious awareness but still shapes communication in powerful ways. To understand such distortions, Habermas distinguishes between standard interpretation and what he calls 'scenic understanding'. Traditional hermeneutics aims to clarify unclear meaning through context or grammar. Scenic understanding, however, attempts to reconstruct the emotional scene that gave rise to the distortion in the first place. This approach traces the message back to a formative emotional experience that was never properly integrated into conscious language. By doing this, the distorted symbols can be returned to the public sphere, restoring some level of shared meaning. Habermas assumes that normal communication relies on agreement—on shared words, shared rules, and the recognition of each other's speech as valid. This shared ground allows people to distinguish between private feelings and public statements. But when this structure collapses, communication turns pathological. Emotions that have not been fully processed—or even recognised—disrupt speech from the inside. The result is not just confusion but a systemic failure to understand or be understood. Defence mechanisms such as denial, projection, and

[147] Habermas, J. (1984) The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society, Beacon Press.

repression are central to this process. These psychological patterns keep disturbing feelings from reaching public language directly, but they still influence speech in subtle and disruptive ways. What appears to be ordinary conversation might mask deep-seated conflicts or emotional blocks. In this sense, psychoanalysis becomes a special form of language analysis. It does not just aim to understand what a speaker is trying to say, but why they are saying it that way—what deeper conflict is shaping their words. By interpreting communication as a symptom of inner conflict, psychoanalysis helps uncover the layers of distortion that make certain types of interaction seem clear when they are not.

False consensus vs. honest reckoning

In his article 'Habermas, Systematically Distorted Communication and the Public Sphere[148]', Alan G. Gross examines how Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action reveals the mechanisms through which language can be manipulated to sustain power structures. Gross explores the concept of systematically distorted communication as a threat to genuine public discourse. The health of both individual consciousness and social institutions depends on language. When communication is distorted at its core, this affects the public's ability to engage meaningfully with political and historical realities. Systematically distorted communication, as Habermas defines it, occurs when language is used in such a way that the appearance of understanding replaces real understanding. This breakdown does not come from a lack of words or information, but from a manipulation of meaning itself. Habermas outlines three major forces that hold society together: power, money, and solidarity. Power and money dominate the systems of politics and economics. Solidarity, however, is shaped within the 'lifeworld'—the space of everyday shared experience where people aim for mutual understanding. Linking these two spheres is the political public sphere, where social tensions caused by inequality can be addressed through open dialogue. In theory, this space allows strangers, united only by nationality, to form a shared identity based on communication rather than force. But for countries like Germany, with a difficult and violent past, national identity is especially fragile. It must balance remembering atrocities like Auschwitz with a forward-looking commitment to democratic values. Friedrich Nietzsche emphasised this tension between remembering and forgetting. He argued that both are necessary for individual and collective health. Forgetting too little leads to paralysis. Forgetting too much erases responsibility. Habermas takes this idea further, showing that only communicative action—grounded in truth, not myth—can generate real solidarity. The article discusses an exhibit that travelled through Germany, confronting the myth of a morally pure Wehrmacht. This narrative of an honourable German army fighting with dignity on the Eastern Front conveniently separates them from Nazi atrocities. But as Alan G. Gross points out, this is a dangerous fiction. Myths like this substitute false consensus for honest reckoning. They replace communicative action with systematically distorted communication. Language played a major role in embedding these myths. Victor Klemperer, in 'The Language of the Third Reich', described how Nazi ideology was carried not just through slogans but through everyday words, idioms, and structures repeated millions of times. Over time, people began to speak the ideology without realising it. Words like 'blood', 'folk', and 'tradition' became saturated with distorted meanings. Even today, traces of this language persist in public discourse, quietly shaping how people think and speak. This linguistic residue poses a problem for democracy. If the public sphere is shaped by language that has been corrupted, then meaningful dialogue is impossible. The danger is that

[148] Gross, A.G. (2000) '2–Habermas, Systematically Distorted Communication and the Public Sphere', Argumentation, 14(4), pp. 393–408.

instead of achieving solidarity through open, reasoned discussion, people accept illusions as truth. In this way, distorted communication undermines the possibility of forming a national identity rooted in accountability and mutual respect. As Habermas notes, Germany's path to political maturity depended on confronting its past, not denying it. Though history may not teach us everything, it can show us what not to repeat—if we are honest enough to listen.

Language as an impediment to social change

In 'Systematically Distorted Communication: An Impediment to Social and Political Change[149]' Alan G. Gross expands on Jürgen Habermas's concept of systematically distorted communication by examining how language can function as both a vehicle for mutual understanding and a tool for self-deception. This form of communication becomes problematic when people believe they are participating in dialogue aimed at understanding, while they are reproducing systems of control and inequality. The distortion is not always intentional or visible. Often, the participants are unaware that their speech serves strategic purposes rather than a genuine exchange. Gross identifies three illustrative cases: Nazi language, sexist language, and the language of pharmaceutical marketing. In each, language ceases to be neutral. It becomes a structure for maintaining existing power arrangements. Nazi language is the clearest and most devastating example. Victor Klemperer documented how words were redefined and weaponised. Language that once carried ethical meaning was stripped of it or replaced with ideological alternatives. These redefinitions entered daily use until even critics of the regime unknowingly adopted its terms. Nazi discourse became embedded so deeply that even victims sometimes echoed its distorted vocabulary. In this case, language enabled people to accept, and even participate in, violent state policies. Sexist language shows how distortion works at the level of social norms. In many cultures, the masculine is positioned as the default. Language frames roles, expectations, and authority through grammar and naming practices. This pattern reflects and reproduces male dominance. Though not as overtly violent as Nazi rhetoric, sexist language still distorts communication by reinforcing unequal power relations and closing off alternative ways of thinking. It creates barriers to understanding by framing the world in terms of hierarchy rather than reciprocity. In the realm of medicine, Gross highlights how drug marketing skews physician decision-making. Advertisements aimed at patients encourage them to request specific treatments. Meanwhile, subtle influences on doctors—such as gifts, sponsored research, or reps' visits—change prescribing habits. These effects persist even when doctors deny being influenced. The distortion lies in the self-deception: professionals believe they are acting rationally and independently, when in fact their actions are being shaped by corporate messaging. Here, language functions not as a medium for shared reasoning but as a tool for quiet manipulation. Gross argues that critique is the first step toward change. Habermas suggests that critique can emerge even from within distorted systems using minimal rational standards—such as the avoidance of contradiction and the appeal to shared norms. However, critique alone is not enough. People must also act. Social change requires moving from analysis to political engagement. It demands a broader rhetorical effort that includes emotional and ethical appeals, not just logic. In each of these cases, distorted communication keeps people from recognising the structures that shape their world. Emancipation begins when this deception is exposed and ends only when institutions are transformed. Language, then, is not just a mirror of society—it is a battleground for its future.

[149] Gross, A.G. (1999) 'Systematically Distorted Communication: An Impediment to Social and Political Change', Argumentation, 13(1), pp. 7–22.

Distorted public sphere

Victor Kempf's article 'The Public Sphere in the Mode of Systematically Distorted Communication[150]' addresses the common idea that the public sphere has fragmented beyond repair. He challenges this view by returning to Jürgen Habermas's notion of the public sphere—not as a specific location or institution, but as the background condition that allows communicative action to take place across society. Rather than seeing fragmentation as the end of public discourse, Kempf interprets it as part of an internal struggle within the social fabric—a response to deeper tensions between systems of control and the lifeworld where genuine dialogue might still occur. The rise of digital echo chambers and filter bubbles is often blamed for weakening democracy and shattering consensus. While these developments are real, Kempf argues they should be seen as defensive reactions against a shared space of meaning that persists. According to Habermas, the public sphere is colonised when the economic, political, and technological systems begin to reshape everyday language and communication. These system logics do not just influence institutions; they seep into private life and interpersonal interactions, turning what should be conversations into transactions or commands. But Kempf takes this further by suggesting that the lifeworld itself—where people live, speak, and relate—has its own internal contradictions. It does not just suffer from external pressures; it can also reject discourse on its own terms. This rejection takes the form of systematically distorted communication. People withdraw from public dialogue not just because of propaganda or surveillance, but because the very possibility of honest, mutual understanding feels blocked. They retreat into more manageable spaces—like niche communities or ideological silos—that mimic public engagement but lack the openness and unpredictability of real conversation. Still, Kempf believes that even in these conditions, the seeds of renewal exist. The lifeworld contains a dialectic—a push and pull between resistance and re-engagement. In this view, fragmentation is not a sign that the public sphere has disappeared. Instead, it shows that society is caught in a moment of pause, a kind of standstill in a longer process where communication might still reassert itself. The public sphere does not vanish; it contracts, hides, and waits for the right conditions to grow again. What Kempf proposes is a more hopeful understanding of public discourse. Rather than viewing today's divisions as permanent, he frames them as part of an evolving conflict between forces that isolate and those that seek connection. If systematically distorted communication can be recognised and critically addressed, then spaces for real dialogue may re-emerge. This approach pushes back against fatalism. It reminds us that the decline of public language is not a one-way street. In recognising distortion, people may recover the capacity to speak and listen across difference—not despite fragmentation, but through it.

Ideological conditioning

In their article 'Habermas on Systematically Distorted Communication'[151]', Aylton Barbieri Durão and Adja Balbino de Amorim Barbieri Durão explore how Jürgen Habermas developed the concept of systematically distorted communication. Habermas argued that communication can break down not just through manipulation or misunderstanding but because of deep-seated distortions linked to personal and ideological repression. Unlike Wittgenstein, who claimed that private language is a contradiction in terms, Habermas acknowledges the existence of linguistic forms that function as if private—particularly in cases of neurosis and

[150] Kempf, V. (2023) 'The Public Sphere in the Mode of Systematically Distorted Communication', Philosophy & Social Criticism, 49(6), pp. 701–718.
[151] Durão, A.B. and Durão, A.B.A.B. (2012) 'Habermas on Systematically Distorted Communication', Revista de Filosofia Aurora, Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina.

ideological distortion. The authors point out that psychoanalysis was key in Habermas's account of this phenomenon. When a child encounters trauma that cannot be processed, the original symbol tied to that experience is repressed. In its place, the child substitutes another symbol, unaware of the switch. Over time, this replacement becomes habitual, forming the basis of repetitive behaviour. This structure resembles a kind of private language. Even though the individual uses public words, they no longer mean the same thing. The communication looks ordinary, but something has broken beneath the surface. Gadamer's hermeneutics sees ordinary language as a universal medium of understanding. Habermas disputes this universality. He argues that there are limits to how far interpretation can go, especially when dealing with distorted communication. Someone suffering from neurosis is not just misunderstood; they are locked into a system of symbols that actively conceal meaning. Interpretation alone cannot fix this because the speaker does not recognise the problem. Instead, what is needed is a clinical setting—a dialogic space where repressed symbols can be brought back into awareness. Habermas brings together ideas from Piaget, Freud, and linguistic theory to support his argument. Piaget shows that humans develop categories like space and causality before acquiring language. These prelinguistic structures shape how we later speak and understand the world. For Habermas, this shows that language is not just a transparent tool. It is shaped by earlier layers of thought and emotion, some of which are hidden or damaged. When those layers are disturbed, language can become distorted—carrying meanings even the speaker cannot decode. The authors also introduce Habermas's concept of 'paleosymbols'—symbols tied to earlier, preverbal experiences. These can reappear in distorted communication, often through dreams or repetitive speech patterns. But they resist ordinary understanding because they lack the grammar and consistency of shared public language. They are fragments of a personal language that does not fully translate. This is why Habermas insists on the need for clinical discourse: only in a therapeutic dialogue can these symbols be re-integrated into a meaningful whole. Habermas shows that systematic distortion in communication is not just a social or political issue—it also has deep psychological roots. It is a breakdown in the public use of language, triggered by repressed trauma or ideological conditioning. Understanding and overcoming this requires more than better interpretation. It demands a different kind of conversation, one that creates space for self-reflection and healing.

Systematically distorted language

Systematically distorted communication, as developed in the theory of Jürgen Habermas, refers to the subtle yet pervasive ways in which language is warped by psychological, ideological, or institutional pressures. This distortion does not simply refer to lying or manipulation. Rather, it arises when speakers are themselves unaware that the words they use no longer serve mutual understanding, but function instead as instruments of self-deception or power maintenance. When communication becomes distorted in this way, language itself is affected—not only how it is used, but how it structures thought, identity, and social relationships. The distortion operates from within language and gradually hollows out its capacity to express truth, sincerity, and solidarity. In his early work, Habermas analysed this phenomenon in relation to both psychoanalysis and ideology. Drawing on Freud, he described how neurosis functions through repression. In these cases, individuals unconsciously substitute a repressed symbol with a replacement that appears innocuous but carries a hidden, unresolved trauma. This substitution process gives rise to paleosymbols—linguistic residues of unprocessed experience that escape conscious interpretation. Although the patient speaks using ordinary language, certain terms carry altered, private meanings. The result is a kind of personal encryption embedded within public discourse. The words remain the same, but their semantic

function is compromised. Communication breaks down, even as it appears to proceed normally. This idea extends beyond clinical neurosis to the domain of ideology. Ideologies also operate through symbolic substitution. They mask social contradictions with stable but misleading signifiers. Nazi language, for example, transformed Enlightenment ideals into tools of exclusion and violence, hollowing out familiar concepts such as 'justice' or 'people' and filling them with nationalist, racialised meanings. As Victor Klemperer observed, everyday language under fascism became infected by ideology to such an extent that even ordinary citizens internalised and reproduced its logic unconsciously. The distortion became systemic because it no longer relied on individual intention but was embedded in the linguistic environment itself. Speakers became prisoners of a language that had ceased to serve emancipatory discourse. Systematically distorted language functions precisely by appearing normal. This is its most dangerous feature. The grammar remains intact, the vocabulary familiar, but the content is redirected. Habermas called this the privatisation of semantic content under the mask of public form. Such language preserves the illusion of communication while eroding its core values: truth, openness, and mutual recognition. It blocks reflexivity and suppresses dissent, not necessarily by forbidding speech but by scripting it in advance. The speaker does not lie—they simply speak a language in which truth is inaccessible or irrelevant. In the public sphere, systematically distorted language thrives under the influence of bureaucracy, markets, and technocratic discourse. Victor Kempf argues that contemporary phenomena such as filter bubbles and echo chambers do not signify the end of the public sphere, but rather its colonisation by system logics. The lifeworld—the shared space of meaning-making—has been penetrated by modes of language that prioritise control, efficiency, and profit over understanding. In such an environment, discourse becomes strategic rather than communicative. Terms are redefined, stripped of nuance, and deployed to generate compliance rather than consensus. The fragmentation of public discourse, far from being a natural effect of pluralism, reflects deeper linguistic distortions where words are no longer bridges but walls. This process undermines the very conditions for rational public dialogue. According to Aylton and Adja Durão, systematically distorted communication cannot be corrected through better interpretation alone. Traditional hermeneutics assumes that speakers share a common language whose meaning can be recovered through context and good faith. But when language itself is the site of repression, interpretation fails. What is required is a clinical or critical discourse—one that can expose and analyse the mechanisms of distortion. Such a discourse, like psychoanalysis, involves not just intellectual inquiry but the creation of spaces where speakers can reflect on their own speech, recover lost meanings, and resist the symbolic systems that deform their words. The political implications of systematically distorted language are profound. In democratic societies, power is supposed to be legitimated through public reason and deliberation. But when language is distorted, reasoned debate gives way to spectacle, technocratic jargon, or ideological cliché. Citizens become estranged not only from one another but from their own speech. Language, once a medium of freedom and self-expression, becomes a tool of domination. Habermas's response to this is not to abandon language, but to deepen our awareness of its fragility and its power. A theory of communicative action must always begin with the recognition that language can fail—and that its failure often reflects deeper social and psychological distortions. Systematically distorted language is not merely bad communication. It is a structural failure of meaning rooted in repression, power, and ideology. It affects not just what is said, but what can be said. It shapes the possibilities of thought, relation, and action. To confront it requires more than critique; it demands new forms of dialogue capable of restoring the communicative function of language. This restoration is both a personal and political task: to speak again in a language that is not strategic, but sincere; not self-deceived, but self-aware.

Deceptive communication

In their exploration of deception[152], Gerald R. Miller and James B. Stiff examine how misleading messages function in political, commercial, and interpersonal contexts. They argue that while society claims to value truth, in practice deception is often tolerated—even expected. This contradiction reveals how deeply rooted deception is in modern communication. From political resignation speeches framed as voluntary to subtle advertising tricks, deception often serves to soften reality, protect reputations, or advance interests. The authors emphasise that deceptive communication is not always malicious. Sometimes it is strategic, a way of managing impressions or avoiding conflict. But its normalisation raises ethical concerns and complicates efforts to preserve honest discourse. In politics, deception can be cloaked as diplomacy. Public officials who resign under pressure rarely admit fault. Instead, their departures are framed as decisions made in the public interest. These narratives are crafted to avoid loss of face and protect institutional legitimacy. The same logic applies internationally. Wartime deception is often justified, as necessary. However, when such lies are exposed—like the U-2 spy plane incident—they can erode public trust. Citizens may come to expect deception, leading to cynicism and weakening democratic accountability. In commerce, deception takes the form of exaggeration. Sales tactics often involve highlighting benefits and downplaying drawbacks. From inflated product claims to ambiguous guarantees, commercial messages are rarely fully transparent. Regulatory bodies like the Federal Trade Commission attempt to curb these practices, but enforcement remains uneven. Miller and Stiff suggest that many consumers are complicit in these exchanges. The appeal of getting more than one pays for often overrides scepticism, allowing deceptive practices to persist. Their research also delves into the behavioural signs of lying. They identify two primary theories. The arousal theory suggests that liars experience stress, which triggers physical signs like fidgeting or changes in voice pitch. The cognitive theory focuses on the mental strain of lying. Crafting a lie demands more effort than telling the truth. As a result, lies tend to be vague, brief, and filled with hesitations or speech errors. Still, these cues are not always dependable. Observers often rely on stereotypes—like the assumption that liars avoid eye contact—when in fact experienced deceivers may do the opposite. Miller and Stiff caution that deception detection is notoriously difficult. Many cues people use to assess honesty have little correlation with actual lying. Some deceivers are simply better at managing their expressions, especially when motivated. This creates a gap between what people expect deceit to look like and how it appears. Vocal cues, such as changes in speech rate or tone, may be more informative than facial expressions, but even these vary with context. In conclusion, deceptive communication is widespread, adaptive, and often socially reinforced. It blends ethical ambiguity with strategic purpose. While society promotes honesty as a virtue, the real world operates on a more complex set of rules—where lies can preserve relationships, protect institutions, or fuel commerce.

Unresolved dialogues

In 'Dialogues with Self and Others: Communication, Miscommunication, and the Dialogical Unconscious[153]' Ian Burkitt explores how communication is not just between individuals, but also within the self. At the heart of his argument is the idea that internal dialogues—formed through past relationships and interactions—shape how people speak, respond, and interpret others. These silent conversations influence everyday communication

[152] Miller, G. R. and Stiff, J. B. (1993) Deceptive Communication. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
[153] Burkitt, I. (1993) Dialogues with Self and Others: Communication, Miscommunication, and the Dialogical Unconscious, Theory & Psychology, 3(4), pp. 431–448.

and are often responsible for misunderstanding. Instead of seeing the mind as isolated, Burkitt insists that thought and emotion arise in relation to others, even when those others are no longer physically present. He builds on social constructionist thinkers such as John Shotter and Kenneth Gergen, who argue that meaning is formed through dialogue. But Burkitt goes further, pointing to a deeper level of interaction that takes place within the self. These internal micro-dialogues carry the voices of others—parents, friends, teachers, or social figures—who have shaped one's identity. Sometimes these voices are in harmony, but often they conflict. When people communicate, they bring not just their own voice, but a chorus of past influences, some conscious, some hidden. Drawing from the work of Martin Buber and Mikhail Bakhtin, Burkitt argues that identity is not static. It shifts depending on who one is speaking to, what one wants to reveal, and what one feels must be concealed. Every interaction is shaped by a complex layering of self-images. People juggle who they are, who they want to be, and who they think others believe them to be. These multiple selves can create confusion, not only in relationships but within the self. A person might act with confidence while feeling insecure or appear calm while masking frustration. These performances are not necessarily dishonest, but they do complicate genuine dialogue. Power also plays a role. Some inside voices carry more weight because they reflect dominant norms or past traumas. Others remain muted. Social structures—like class, gender, or cultural expectations—can shape which parts of the self are allowed to speak and which are silenced. Miscommunication, then, is not just about misunderstanding someone's words, but about the inability or unwillingness to hear the quiet, often neglected parts of their internal world. Burkitt calls for a deeper kind of communication. Not just one that exchanges information, but one that is open to transformation. For dialogue to be real, people must be willing to let go of fixed roles and expectations. They must make space for uncertainty and allow themselves to be changed by what they hear. Only then can hidden voices emerge, both within and between people. In the end, Burkitt's work reveals how language, memory, emotion, and power converge in every act of communication. Understanding others requires understanding the self, and that self is not a single voice, but a shifting conversation of many. Miscommunication is not simply a failure of clarity—it often reflects the deeper, unresolved dialogues that shape what people say and what remains unsaid.

Necessary distortion

The idea of the necessary systematic distortion of communication through language is rooted in the understanding that language, while essential for communication, inherently alters or distorts the messages it conveys. This distortion occurs because language is an abstraction — a system of symbols used to represent and communicate ideas, concepts, and experiences that are far more complex than any single word or phrase can fully encapsulate. At its core, language operates by simplifying reality. It categorises and classifies complex phenomena, often by reducing them to terms that can be universally understood within a particular linguistic or cultural context. However, this simplification can never truly capture the entirety of human experience or the nuance of a given situation. As a result, communication is always a compromise between the fullness of a person's inner experience and the constraints of language. One of the most fundamental sources of distortion arises from the fact that words are abstractions, and abstractions always involve omission. For example, the word 'tree' refers to a category of objects, but it does not capture the specific characteristics of any individual tree — its size, shape, colour, or texture. Instead, the word represents a generalised concept that can be applied to any number of different trees. This abstraction inherently distorts the richness of the original experience of the tree, reducing it to a mere label. The distortion becomes even more significant when different people use the same word but carry different mental images or

associations with it. Moreover, language itself is shaped by social and cultural factors, further distorting the communication process. Words and phrases carry meanings that are context-dependent and influenced by societal norms, values, and historical developments. For instance, the term 'freedom' may hold different connotations in different political systems or cultures, and the word 'justice' might evoke different understandings based on one's personal experiences, upbringing, or exposure to various ideologies. These shifts in meaning create gaps in understanding, even among people who speak the same language. Another dimension of distortion occurs when individuals use language to express complex or abstract thoughts, which often cannot be fully captured by existing words. Concepts such as 'love', 'truth', or 'freedom' are all laden with layers of meaning, and when people attempt to articulate their thoughts on these subjects, they inevitably simplify or omit aspects of their own experience. This is especially apparent in the realm of emotions, where language struggles to convey the depth and complexity of feelings. What one person may mean by 'love' can be vastly different from another's interpretation of the same word, despite both using the same term. In the context of scientific and philosophical discourse, the systematic distortion of communication becomes even more apparent. Every scientific theory, for example, relies on certain assumptions and simplifications that can never fully capture the complexity of the phenomena being studied. As theories evolve and new data is discovered, earlier models are revised or discarded. This process demonstrates that language (and the conceptual frameworks it supports) is always in flux and cannot fully represent the underlying reality it seeks to describe. In this way, language itself becomes a tool of abstraction and distortion that shapes not only how we communicate but also how we think and understand the world. This necessary distortion does not necessarily diminish the value of language, but it highlights the importance of being mindful of its limitations. Recognising that language is always a simplification and that communication is inherently distorted can encourage greater awareness in both personal and social interactions. It also invites us to think more critically about the terms we use, the meanings they carry, and the potential gaps between what we intend to communicate and how our message is received. Acknowledging the inevitable gaps in communication can foster greater empathy and understanding, and inspire more careful, precise, and open dialogue. The systematic distortion of communication through language is, therefore, a foundational aspect of human interaction. It reveals both the power and limitations of language as a tool for understanding and sharing our experiences. While such distortions may never be eliminated, awareness of them inevitably tempts one to exploit them for advantage rather than expose them to the public.

7.2. Language of names

(Naming and erasure: How language dismantles personhood)

'What is called objectivity in administration is often the elimination of human judgment'.

— Zygmunt Bauman, Modernity and the Holocaust

'To call someone a name is to place them in a category—and to place them in a category is to control them'.

— Judith Butler, Excitable Speech

'Every word has consequences. Every silence, too'.

— Jean-Paul Sartre, What is Literature?

Who named humans?(It is not God)

Humans were not named by God, nor by any divine hand recorded in scripture, but by a Swedish botanist in the 18th century. Carl Linnaeus, born in 1707 in the rural region of Småland, Sweden, was the man who formally named the entire human species. A clergyman's son and a gifted student of nature, Linnaeus devoted his life to cataloguing and classifying the natural world. In his groundbreaking 1735 work 'Systema Naturae', he introduced a revolutionary naming system known as binomial nomenclature—a system still used worldwide to scientifically define every living organism, including ourselves. Under this system, each species is assigned a two-part Latin name consisting of a genus and a species designation. For modern humans, Linnaeus chose the name Homo sapiens, meaning 'wise man'. The term Homo was derived from the Latin word homō, referring to a human being, while sapiens was intended to distinguish humans by their capacity for knowledge and reason. The label carries an implicit hierarchy: not just man, but wise man—an assertion both flattering and presumptuous. Linnaeus's contribution was not a mere linguistic act but a scientific milestone that attempted to impose structure and universal order on the overwhelming diversity of life. With this system, a small circle of European scientists created a naming convention grounded in Latin grammar that remains the foundation of modern taxonomy. Every species—from microbes to mammals—is now situated in this grid of genus and species, and humanity, too, is classified within the animal kingdom. The irony is striking. Despite religious traditions that place humans above the rest of creation, science classifies people squarely among animals. The perceived dichotomy between 'human' and 'animal' is cultural, not biological. In fact, all humans are animals, a fact that the Linnaean system makes inescapably clear. To be named Homo sapiens is not only to be named by another human but also to be grouped with primates, mammals, and all life forms that breathe, move, and reproduce. The origins of the word human stretch further back than Linnaeus. It entered English from Old French humain, derived from Latin hūmānus, the adjectival form of homō. Yet it was Linnaeus who gave the species its scientific identity, who placed humanity within a greater biological framework governed by classification and comparison. Even more curiously, the only specimen Linnaeus examined to define the species Homo sapiens was himself. According to the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature, his own body is considered the type specimen—the scientific reference point for all human beings. Although Linnaeus may have been a classifier, his impact was poetic. Figures like Rousseau and Goethe praised him not just as a scientist but as a thinker of rare depth. Swedish author August Strindberg even described him as a poet masquerading as a naturalist. His binomial system was not only practical but philosophical—it imposed language, symmetry, and Latin precision on a chaotic world. Through it, one man shaped how all other humans would be scientifically known. Linnaeus, not God, named humanity. And with that name, a new era began—one where knowledge replaced myth, and where the human species named itself in the mirror of reason.

Language of names

Names are among the first gifts people receive, and they carry immense symbolic weight. In 'The Language of Names[154]', Justin Kaplan and Anne Bernays explore how names shape personal identity, evoke ancestral memory, and reflect cultural values. A name is never just a label; it becomes a vessel for stories, expectations, and histories. People feel their names deeply, often defending them like territory, or altering them when they no longer fit the life they wish to lead. Freud once suggested that names hold a fragment of the soul, a psychological charge that binds identity to language. For some, names are living memorials. Dan Jansen's victory lap with his daughter, named after his late sister, showed how names preserve emotional continuity through time. But this kind of naming can also place a heavy burden. Psychologists refer to 'replacement child syndrome' when a child is named after a deceased sibling and is subtly expected to fill that void. Salvador Dalí believed his eccentricity was a reaction to being named after a dead brother—a struggle to prove his unique existence. Names are not optional. No known culture has functioned without them. They organise social life, mark lineage, and establish status. A full name ties a person to a web of family and tradition. Yet names also carry magical and religious weight. In many traditions, to know a divine name is to possess power over the divine. Ancient Hebrew priests guarded the pronunciation of God's name with extreme caution. In Islam, the ninety-nine names of Allah carry deep spiritual significance. These practices remind us that names are not just about classification—they are about reverence, power, and access. Anthropologists like Frazer and Clodd noted that in many cultures, a name is believed to contain a person's essence. In such belief systems, harming someone's name can be as damaging as physical harm. This idea still lingers in modern life. A misspoken name can be insulting. A name forgotten can break a bond. A name deliberately twisted can be a subtle form of aggression. Salespeople and politicians often use names as tools for manipulation, knowing that a person's name is the shortest route to their attention. Names can change, and when they do, the person changes with them. New names are often linked to rebirth—religious conversion, artistic reinvention, gender transition, or the need to escape a past. George Eliot, Che Guevara, and Mother Teresa are remembered more by their adopted names than by those given at birth. In such transformations, the name becomes a signal of chosen identity. The freedom to rename oneself is especially pronounced in American culture. The legal system allows name changes with few restrictions, and the reasons for doing so range from trauma to personal reinvention. One applicant in New York simply wanted to break ties with her father. Another changed his name to 'George Washington America', turning identity into performance. Meanwhile, courts still resist purely symbolic or numeric names. One man's attempt to rename himself 1069 was denied on the grounds that it was 'offensive to human dignity'. The case raised old philosophical questions: is a name meaningful because of what it refers to, or because of what it represents? Famous cases highlight the emotional and bureaucratic complexity of name changes. When Renee Richards transitioned from male to female, she had to update everything—credit cards, medical records, memberships—each document a proof of rebirth. In contrast, some people try to vanish behind pseudonyms or disappear into anonymity. Figures like B. Traven and the Doe aliases reflect how names can be used as shields as much as signatures. Writers, too, use names to craft public identities. Samuel Clemens became Mark Twain to evoke the Mississippi River and signal literary rebirth. Nathaniel Hawthorne altered his family name to distance himself from ancestral shame. Zane Grey, Tennessee Williams, and Woody Allen all reshaped their names to better fit their artistic personas. These changes are not trivial—they signal deep shifts in how the individual wants to be perceived. Kaplan and Bernays

[154] Kaplan, J. and Bernays, A. (1997) The Language of Names. New York: Simon & Schuster.

show that names are not static. They evolve with the person and the culture. Names reflect who people were, who they are, and who they want to become. They are both personal and political, sacred, and practical. They hold together the threads of family, memory, belief, ambition, and transformation. Names are how people tell stories about themselves. Whether passed down through generations, chosen in moments of crisis, or shed like old skin, names carry meaning far beyond the letters on a page. They frame lives, carry burdens, offer hopes, and sometimes even grant a kind of immortality.

Naming as shaping of reality

In 'The Language of Names', Justin Kaplan and Anne Bernays observed that the act of naming is a privilege reserved for the powerful, implying that language serves as a reflection of authority and control. This observation is not merely rhetorical; it reveals how naming can shape perception, enforce hierarchies, and construct social reality. Names are not just words; they are tools of influence. The act of naming—whether a person, place, or concept—introduces meaning into the world and imposes a particular framework for understanding. This theme runs deep in the history of ideas. In Plato's 'Cratylus', two opposing views clash over whether names arise naturally or through social agreement. Hermogenes argues for convention, believing that any name can serve if people agree on its use. Cratylus insists that names are connected to the essence of things. Socrates offers a compromise: names may begin in nature but shift under cultural and social pressure. This tension between arbitrary convention and natural essence still informs how humans relate to names today. It becomes even more powerful when considered in political and cultural terms, as Nietzsche suggested. The biblical story of Adam naming the animals highlights the deep link between naming and mastery. In giving names to the creatures of the earth, Adam is not just labelling them—he is also establishing a kind of dominion over them. In many religious traditions, to know the true name of something or someone is to hold power over it. The divine name in the Hebrew Bible, YHWH, was considered so sacred that it was spoken only by the high priests, reinforcing the idea that language carries a weight that transcends daily use. Modern philosophy and linguistics have complicated this picture. Ferdinand de Saussure argued that the relationship between words and their referents is arbitrary. Yet this arbitrariness does not mean names are meaningless. Rather, meaning emerges from the relationships among words in a linguistic system. Still, in everyday life, people often feel that names matter. Children may feel wronged if someone teases them by mispronouncing or changing their name. In politics and media, naming determines how people interpret events and behaviours. Justin Kaplan and Anne Bernays emphasise this phenomenon in their study of names and identity. They show that a name is more than a label; it is often felt as an extension of the self. People define who they are through their names. Some change their names to signal new beginnings, escape past traumas, or align with new beliefs. Immigrants anglicise names to fit in. Writers adopt pen names to shape their public personas. Revolutionary leaders choose names to inspire followers. In each case, naming functions as self-definition and social positioning. Naming also serves those in power. Governments use euphemisms to obscure violent or unpopular policies—'enhanced interrogation' for torture, 'collateral damage' for civilian death. Corporations rename products to attract consumers, even when the item remains unchanged. These strategies demonstrate that naming can disguise reality while presenting a more acceptable version of it. Slogans, campaigns, and propaganda rely on this principle. A successful phrase becomes a shared understanding, shutting down alternative interpretations. In this context, naming is not passive or neutral. It actively shapes perception. When public discourse repeats certain terms—'war on terror', 'illegal alien', 'freedom fighter'—it orients people toward specific values and reactions. To name is to claim authority over what something

is and how it should be judged. As such, naming defines the field of responses. It limits or expands what people can think and say. This is why Nietzsche saw language as an instrument of the masters. To control naming is to define the boundaries of the imaginable. People cannot resist what they cannot name. Thus, language becomes the field where freedom is won or lost. Even the refusal to accept a name—rejecting imposed labels, renaming oneself—can be an act of rebellion. The field of onomastics, though sometimes dismissed as trivial, reveals the vast cultural and psychological influence of names. From product branding to sacred invocations, from birth certificates to pseudonyms, names anchor meaning in human life. Kaplan and Bernays trace this influence across personal, political, and historical landscapes. They show how names carry both memory and possibility. In doing so, they remind readers that the words people choose—and the names they answer to—are never neutral. Naming is a fundamental way of organising human experience. It defines identity, controls perception, and channels social power. As Nietzsche, Plato, and modern thinkers suggest, those who name the world shape how it is understood. The capacity to name is a form of control—sometimes benevolent, often strategic. It can liberate or oppress, clarify, or obscure. In the end, naming is not just about language. It is about who gets to define reality—and who does not.

Naming as defining

To name something is to define it—but also, to reduce it. Naming strips away the full texture of a thing's presence and replaces it with a simplified sign. It transforms experience into label, event into category, uniqueness into a word that can be repeated. When someone uses a name, they are not describing the thing itself; they are performing an act of definition, often using borrowed terms and ready-made meanings. Most of the time, people do not even know the meaning of the name they are using. They just say the sound at the right moment, to the right person, and it works. That is enough. This performative function of naming gives it extraordinary power. You do not need to understand what 'terrorist', 'socialist', or even 'love' really means—you only need to say the word. The reaction follows. The effect is real. In this way, language becomes an engine for producing reality rather than reflecting it. A person who uses a term correctly within a shared context does not need to justify or define it. The community supplies the meaning. The term carries weight because the group believes it does. This is precisely what the Thomas theorem describes: 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences'. People act not on what is objectively true, but on what they perceive and define as true. Naming a situation defines it. Once the word is spoken, the definition is active, and consequences follow. In a large society, few people have direct experience of what a term refers to. They trust the word, the label, the category. In small groups, people may know each other and the things around them directly. In mass societies, all knowledge is mediated, and most names are accepted on faith. The difference is crucial. In small groups, someone calling you 'lazy' or 'heroic' might be based on years of lived experience. In larger systems—bureaucracies, religions, corporations, media—people carry names, titles, and roles that have nothing to do with who they are. These names are tools for management. They are efficient ways to organise, classify, and control. They make governance, commerce, and war possible. You do not need to know someone to tax them, imprison them, or promote them—you just need to know their name and what that name is supposed to mean. Over time, the names replace the people. The roles replace the persons. The map replaces the territory. To speak of 'the unemployed', 'the criminal class', or 'essential workers' is to speak of categories, not individuals. This erases the complexity of lived reality and turns people into symbols. Words do not only fail to capture the world—they rewrite it. This is why naming becomes a central process in building and maintaining systems of power. It allows those who control the terms to control the

world that emerges from them. When institutions define something—whether it is a disease, a social group, a threat, or a truth—they are not just describing. They are setting the conditions for how others will respond. The performative use of language replaces the presence of direct experience. Repetition of the name sustains belief in its meaning. Naming also creates boundaries. To name something is to distinguish it from what it is not. To define is to exclude. Every label—race, gender, nationality, ideology—draws a circle. It creates inside and outside. Those who do not share the name become other. And so, language fractures the world, dividing what once was a shared human field into managed sectors of meaning. Families, tribes, nations, and classes are constructed out of words. This fragmentation is not accidental. It is essential to control. In large systems, direct experience is inefficient. Symbols are faster. Labels are stronger. Belief in the name becomes more important than knowledge of the thing. If a word like 'enemy' can be invoked with the right tone, the result is action. No need to investigate, no need to understand. Just say the name. Watch the consequences. In this way, naming becomes a mechanism of discommunication. It replaces dialogue with command. It replaces presence with representation. The power to name is not only the power to define—it is the power to erase, to control, and to reshape. The world built through language becomes real because people act as if it were. And this acting, this trust in words, sustains entire realities. Naming is not merely a label but an act of definition that shapes perceived reality. As the power to name becomes the power to limit, frame, and make consequences real through perception.

Language and the media

John F. Myles' analysis of Pierre Bourdieu's work brings language, media, and power into sharp focus. Drawing primarily on 'Language and Symbolic Power[155]', Myles develops Bourdieu's view that language is never neutral or purely communicative—it is always shaped by social forces and carries with it the potential for symbolic violence. Rather than focusing exclusively on Bourdieu's specific writings on television and journalism, Myles applies his broader sociological framework to explore how language operates across various forms of media, including talk radio, newspapers, photojournalism, and digital communication. These media do not merely transmit language; they actively shape and enforce social norms and hierarchies. Bourdieu rejected Saussure's structuralist concept of langue as an abstract system removed from real-life usage. Instead, he focused on parole, or language in use. For him, the way people speak—their accent, vocabulary, and grammar—reveals much about their social position. Language becomes a marker of class, gender, age, and education. In this view, language is not simply a tool to express ideas, but a form of social action, deeply tied to the speaker's habitus—the ingrained habits and dispositions shaped by one's background and social experience. This has major implications for understanding media. Myles shows how media institutions help reproduce linguistic norms that align with dominant social groups. Standardised forms like Received Pronunciation in the UK or General American in the US are not neutral or inevitable—they are chosen, taught, and policed by those in power. Media outlets, from style manuals to newsroom editing practices, play a central role in maintaining these standards. Through such repetition, the dominant linguistic forms become naturalised and treated as correct, while other forms—regional accents, working-class speech, immigrant dialects—are seen as improper or inferior. What Bourdieu calls symbolic violence is this quiet imposition of hierarchy through language. It is rarely experienced as overt force, but it shapes people's lives just as profoundly. For instance, speakers of non-standard dialects may feel

[155] Myles, J. F. (2010) 'Bourdieu, Language and the Media', in Language and Symbolic Power. Oxford: Routledge.

compelled to change their speech in professional settings to avoid judgment. Or, they may remain silent altogether, reinforcing their marginalisation. Media representations often reflect and perpetuate these dynamics, subtly favouring voices and accents that conform to dominant norms. The concept of the linguistic market is essential here. Each social setting has its own rules about what kind of speech is valued. In the media field, these rules are particularly strong, and media professionals act as gatekeepers who decide which voices are heard and how they are framed. For Bourdieu, this market is not just about communication but about power. Language has value because it is recognised as legitimate by those who control the means of symbolic production. Myles also addresses the issue of reception—how audiences interpret and respond to media language. While empirical data from audience research can help map the structure of the media field, Bourdieu's focus remains on the broader social relations that structure linguistic practices. Reflexivity—people's awareness of the social implications of their speech—can sometimes be seen in media interactions, such as code-switching or resistance to imposed norms. Yet for Bourdieu, such agency is shaped more by the body and habitus than by rational calculation. The media becomes a site where linguistic struggles are visible. Debates over standard accents, the rise of estuary English, or the calculated use of 'mockney' in British media show how language reflects shifting power relations. These are not trivial aesthetic concerns. They reveal how speakers try to position themselves socially through language. At the same time, the persistence of dominant norms shows how difficult it is to escape the gravitational pull of symbolic power. Myles argues that Bourdieu's framework remains vital for media studies today. Even as new technologies emerge and language practices change, the underlying structures of power that govern who gets to speak, how they are heard, and what forms of speech are valued have not disappeared. The media continues to be a central arena where these dynamics play out. From voice and accent to grammar and register, every linguistic choice is loaded with social meaning. In conclusion, the work of Bourdieu, as interpreted by Myles, shows that language in media is not simply about clarity or aesthetics. It is about who holds power, who is silenced, and how symbolic violence operates through benign forms like pronunciation and tone. Understanding this interplay is essential not just for linguists or media theorists, but for anyone interested in the subtle ways inequality is produced and maintained in everyday life. Language is the primary instrument of social inequality, enabling its reproduction on a mass scale in ways that would be impossible without it.

Naming as discommunication

The power to name has long been considered a defining feature of language and civilisation. It gives humans the ability to organise, describe, and manipulate their surroundings. Yet this same act of naming, often seen as a tool of understanding, also plays a central role in discommunication. Naming separates rather than unites. It fragments reality into categories, draws invisible lines around people and things, and facilitates control through abstraction. What begins as a practical act becomes a political one: naming is a means of ownership, of classification, and of domination. From the moment Adam was said to name the animals in Genesis, the act has carried with it a sense of possession. To name something is to isolate it from the undivided whole, to give it boundaries and reduce it to a concept. As Emerson once noted, every word was originally a stroke of genius, capturing some essential experience of the world. But over time, those strokes become fossils. The richness of the world, once felt and seen, becomes a label. As Justin Kaplan and Anne Bernays observe, names are never neutral—they carry histories, social positions, and expectations. When someone or something is named, it is not merely identified; it is framed, judged, and set into relation with a broader system of meanings. The child who learns their own name also learns their place. This process creates

groups and boundaries. Names gather people into families, tribes, classes, and nations, while also dividing them. They become tools of identity and tools of exclusion. The same name that signals belonging also defines who is other. 'Us' and 'them' are born the moment a name is assigned. The power to name others—to call someone criminal, foreigner, or terrorist—is a form of power over their status, their rights, and their humanity. The more abstract the name, the easier it is to act upon its bearer without guilt. Naming thus enables discommunication: people stop seeing others as individuals and begin responding to the names they carry. Language, as N. J. Enfield points out, is especially good at shaping perception, often at the expense of truth. Lawyers, advertisers, and politicians thrive on this capacity, while scientists struggle against it. Words do not represent reality neutrally; they frame it. And just as a map is not the territory, the name on the map is not the place itself. Yet names become how vast territories are managed. With a label, a place becomes governable. With a word, a person becomes a category. Control becomes possible not by knowing things but by naming them. The abstraction inherent in naming scales well with social complexity. As societies grow, direct contact gives way to symbolic management. Leaders do not need to know the people they govern; they only need to know the names of their districts, demographics, and voting blocs. The intimacy of the local gives way to the legibility of the mapped. Naming becomes a form of distance. The more names, the less presence. In this way, naming destroys communion. Where once language may have served shared experience and mutual recognition, it now creates barriers. Words replace things. Labels replace persons. A community becomes a population; a person becomes a case file; a death becomes a statistic. The fluid experience of living is frozen into static signs. Language ceases to connect and begins to categorise. This is the logic of discommunication. It is not a failure to speak, but a success in controlling how others are spoken about. Those who master the system of names do not merely describe the world; they redesign it. They set the terms by which others are known, governed, or excluded. Naming thus becomes not only a tool of communication but a system of symbolic control. It abstracts, separates, and obscures. The path forward, if there is one, lies in remembering that a name is not the thing. To see clearly, one must look beyond the label, beyond the sign, beyond the name—back to the presence that language too often replaces. Words divide, replace, and control by shaping perception, redefining reality, and reinforcing the power of those who wield them.

7.3. Dehumanising language

(Vocabulary of cruelty: When words strip away humanity)

'Before they put you in a gas chamber, they called you a rat'.

— Victor Klemperer, The Language of the Third Reich

'Language can be used to justify anything—from genocide to bureaucracy—if it erases the face of the other'.

— Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity

Creatures of a kind inferior

Dehumanisation does not begin with violence. It begins with words. David Livingstone Smith's 'Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others[156]' reveals how language lays the groundwork for brutality. Before anyone is enslaved, bombed, or erased, they are first called something else—vermin, savage, beast. The transformation from human to subhuman happens linguistically. And without that shift in language, the acts that follow would be impossible. In small communities, where everyone knows each other personally, dehumanisation struggles to take root. Face-to-face relationships foster mutual recognition. It is difficult to turn your neighbour into an insect or object when you share daily life. But in large, impersonal societies, language becomes a powerful tool of division. Propaganda thrives where anonymity reigns. The more distant the other, the easier it is to rename them, to strip away their humanity with a single metaphor. Smith argues that dehumanisation is not simply a matter of hate. It is a rational process. People invent categories, draw boundaries, and exclude others based on perceived essence. The phrase 'creatures of a kind somewhat inferior', used in the 18th century to describe African slaves, expresses this logic perfectly. It is not crude rage, but cool classification that paves the way for cruelty. The act of naming implies knowledge and power. Once a person is named as less than human, they become available for domination. Language does not merely reflect thought. It shapes it. Naming someone as a rat or a cockroach allows violence to appear as extermination, not murder. It turns ethical prohibitions into acts of hygiene. Smith shows how this mechanism operated in Nazi Germany, colonial America, and beyond. In each case, the shift in language preceded the shift in action. The horror began not with blood, but with vocabulary. Propaganda serves to systematise this process. It repeats and amplifies dehumanising terms until they seem natural. When a word like 'subhuman' becomes part of the common tongue, it does more than insult. It removes moral constraint. It prepares people to act in ways they otherwise would not. The word becomes a weapon, dulling conscience and enabling atrocity. Smith's research suggests that dehumanisation is more than a by-product of ideology. It is built into the structure of group identity. Every group depends on an 'us' and a 'them', and language enforces that boundary. The more abstract and generalised the language, the easier it becomes to forget the individual behind the label. A name can erase a face. It is no accident that totalitarian regimes are obsessed with language. They understand that control over words means control over minds. In the end, Smith's message is clear. If people want to resist dehumanisation, they must begin with language. They must listen carefully to how others are named and described. Because once the wrong word is accepted, the rest may follow.

Dehumanising always starts with language

In her book 'Braving the Wilderness[157]', Brené Brown reflects on how language sets the stage for dehumanisation. She argues that the words people use do not just describe reality—they reshape it. When language is used to divide, belittle, or stereotype, it becomes a tool of violence. The path to cruelty, she says, begins not with weapons, but with words. Brown's research shows that when people are stripped of their humanity in language, the social inhibitions that protect others from harm start to erode. Most people do not wake up intending to hurt others, but once a group is labelled as less than human, that harm becomes easier to

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[156] Smith, D. L. (2012) Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others. New York: St. Martin's Press.

[157] Brown, B. (2017) Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone. New York: Random House.

justify. Dehumanisation works by creating distance. It allows one group to see another as undeserving of empathy. It begins subtly, often through casual remarks or exaggerated labels, and builds into cultural habits that excuse exclusion and abuse. The philosopher Michelle Maiese calls dehumanisation 'the psychological process of demonising the enemy', a tactic used to justify actions that would otherwise violate moral norms. This process is not simply about hurt feelings. It changes how people think, stripping others of moral worth. It reframes a disagreement into a battle between good and evil. Once a conflict is described in those terms, compromise disappears. The only options left are domination or defeat. David Livingstone Smith, author of 'Less Than Human', explains how this works on a biological level. Humans are wired to feel empathy for one another. Dehumanisation is a way to suppress those instincts. It builds a narrative that says certain people are not really people. Historically, this has taken the form of calling Jews rats, Tutsis cockroaches, Indigenous people savages, or immigrants animals. Such language has always preceded violence, making atrocities not only possible but accepted. Brown's data reveals that people feel emotionally unsafe not just when they hear opposing views, but when they hear language that reduces others to stereotypes. Emotional safety, she explains, is not about avoiding discomfort. It is about drawing a boundary at dehumanisation. Without that line, conversation breaks down. Without empathy, people can no longer truly listen. They talk past each other, trapped in a cycle of blame and moral superiority. Social media accelerates this process. Platforms reward outrage and allow users to attack others anonymously. There is little cost to dehumanising others online, but the cultural cost is high. Once someone is labelled a traitor, a criminal, or less than human, they are treated as disposable. Public discourse decays into insult and retaliation. Brown argues that accountability and dehumanisation are not the same. You can hold someone responsible without stripping them of dignity. True justice starts with seeing others as human, even when they have caused harm. Dehumanisation, by contrast, is never a path to healing. It diminishes not only its target, but the one who speaks it. Brown closes with a warning: When people desecrate others through words, they desecrate themselves. If people honestly believe in justice or faith, then that belief must extend to how they speak about their enemies. Recognising the humanity in others is the first step to preserving it in ourselves.

Ambivalence and transgression

Dehumanisation is never spontaneous. It begins with speech. The act of reducing another human being to something 'less than human' always starts by altering the way people talk. In 'Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others[158]', David Livingstone Smith shows that mass violence and cruelty rely not only on physical acts, but on language—on metaphors, slurs, and names that change how others are perceived. Once language marks someone as different, inferior, or dangerous, violence becomes easier to justify. The knife always follows the word. This process cannot thrive in small communities. When people live in close contact, when they know each other by name and story, dehumanisation is hard to sustain. One cannot easily call a neighbour vermin. There is too much context—too much shared memory, too many human ties. The more distant and abstract the relation, the easier it becomes to substitute names for persons. Modern propaganda needs mass society, where language can operate without personal encounter. In large societies, names take over where faces once sufficed. The enemy becomes 'Kraut', 'Jap', or 'gook'. The refugee becomes 'illegal'. The poor become 'welfare recipients'. These names simplify the world, stripping it of ambiguity

[158] Smith, D.L. (2012) Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others. New York: St. Martin's Press.

and turning complex lives into manageable symbols. This is not mere insult. It is a tool of perception. When one no longer sees people but labels, empathy vanishes. Words, repeated often enough, break the link between language and the flesh it once named. Smith describes how soldiers rarely say they killed a man. They say they 'took him out', or 'got the target'. This kind of euphemism allows killing without the burden of guilt. Deception is built into the system. It shields not only the perpetrators from horror, but also the society that authorises them. The state, the media, and the military all take part in crafting this controlled vocabulary. The language of war becomes abstract, sanitised, and distant. Death, once personal, becomes procedural. But this suppression reveals something deeper: a moral conflict. Humans are capable of immense cruelty, but they are also wired for guilt. As Smith notes, most people must be trained to kill. Historically, many soldiers have refused to fire their weapons. The act of killing, even when justified by the state, produces shame. What emerges is a split—a psychological division. One part of the mind acts; another recoils. Ambivalence is not weakness. It is a sign that something human remains intact. This duality—of cruelty and conscience—is fundamental. The same people who conduct atrocities often describe a strange kind of joy in violence. Soldiers report feeling euphoria in the act of destruction, even love for their comrades in the heat of battle. But this is followed, later, by guilt, disgust, or trauma. The joy of violence does not erase the cost of it. It only delays it. The naming of others, then, is not neutral. It creates categories that permit action while silencing doubt. To call someone a 'beast' or a 'threat' is to prepare the ground for harm. Language does not just reflect reality; it transforms it. Once a name is in place, it becomes difficult to see past it. Reality narrows to the word. Power thrives on this narrowing. The more people one governs, the more essential abstraction becomes. Names allow rulers to manage vast populations as if they were uniform. The map, after all, is not the territory, but it governs the territory, nonetheless. And so does the name. One cannot control a million people individually, but one can control 'the workers', 'the heretics', 'the criminals'. Once the group is named, the policy follows. And once the name sticks, the individual becomes invisible. Language does not only link people. It also divides them. It draws boundaries—between us and them, friend and enemy, human and not. The greater the social scale, the more dependent society becomes on labels. And the more it depends on them, the more it risks losing the human in the name. In this way, every act of mass dehumanisation is preceded by a linguistic act. The weapon is primed by grammar.

Linguistic theory of dehumanisation

In 'Less Than Human', David Livingstone Smith shows how language can dehumanise others, turning them into symbolic targets and paving the way for violence and moral exclusion. Dehumanisation begins with language. Before a person is harmed, they are renamed. The act of violence is preceded by a verbal shift. A slur replaces a name. A metaphor strips away individuality. Words no longer describe a fellow human but suggest a creature to be feared, hated, or exterminated. In Smith’s account, this is not incidental—it is essential. Without the groundwork of language, dehumanisation cannot take hold. In small, close-knit groups, this process fails. People who see each other daily, who know one another’s names, stories, and faces, find it difficult to see others as subhuman. Language in these settings stays connected to real people and relationships. It cannot easily drift into abstraction. But as societies grow larger, this changes. Distance sets in. People begin to rely on labels, stories, categories. In this environment, propaganda thrives. Mass media, education systems, and political rhetoric can spread dehumanising language across a population. The slur becomes common sense. The metaphor becomes reality. The shift in language leads to a shift in perception. Smith explains that this is not just about hatred. Dehumanisation solves a psychological problem. Most people

do not want to kill. They feel disgust or guilt at the idea. But if the target is not seen as human, those barriers fall. Language helps to remove those barriers. Calling someone a cockroach or a virus makes violence feel necessary. The act is no longer murder—it is extermination or quarantine. Language is the tool that enables moral disengagement. It reframes cruelty as justice. This reframing depends on the belief in essences. Smith shows how people imagine that others carry invisible qualities that define them. When a group is dehumanised, it is said to lack the essential traits of humanity—reason, empathy, morality. The group may look human but is seen as an imitation. This makes it easier to justify harm. The victim is not just bad, but unnatural. Their removal seems not only acceptable but urgent. Such beliefs are reinforced by repetition. Language must be used again. Stories must be told repeatedly. Smith warns that this repetition is most effective when it becomes invisible. When everyone uses the same terms, they feel true. The language feels natural. People stop questioning it. A name becomes a filter. It controls how others are seen and treated. Bureaucracies adopt euphemisms—'processing', 'cleansing', 'relocation'. Soldiers speak of 'targets', not people. Journalists echo political terms. Slowly, the world is reordered. And yet, Smith points out something even more unsettling. This process does not require bad intentions. Those who dehumanise often think they are doing good. They believe they are defending themselves, protecting others, serving justice. Language helps maintain this illusion. It allows people to feel virtuous while committing atrocities. This is why dehumanisation is so dangerous. It hides behind the familiar. It wears the mask of reason, morality, even compassion. The terrifying possibility Smith raises is that language itself carries this danger. Once language becomes complex enough to name, divide, and abstract, it can be used to exclude and destroy. As language evolves, it becomes more effective at managing large populations. It becomes a system of control. Naming something can mean owning it, commanding it, eliminating it. Words replace reality. Names replace people. Categories replace communities. The very power that allows language to build society also allows it to tear it apart. In this sense, Smith's theory implies that language is not a neutral tool. It is more like nuclear energy—capable of great utility, but also immense destruction. Language enables distant coordination, abstract governance, and complex culture. But it also makes mass dehumanisation, exploitation, inequality, and war. As language expands, so does the potential for manipulation, distortion, and moral decay. Smith insists that countering this process requires more than arguments. Reason fails where empathy has been shut down. Philosophical appeals to dignity do not work when dignity has been linguistically denied. Even sentimental stories, as Rorty suggests, can be weaponised. Some of the most brutal regimes in history have justified their actions through long, emotional narratives of suffering and revenge. What matters is not just which stories are told, but how language is used, repeated, and institutionalised. The study of dehumanisation must begin with language. Not just what is said, but how words function in power structures, in institutions, and in the minds of individuals. Understanding this dynamic is crucial. Otherwise, language will continue to be used not to connect people, but to divide and destroy them.

The language of the Third Reich

Victor Klemperer's 'The Language of the Third Reich[159]' is a rare and powerful chronicle of how a regime can seize language to control thought and behaviour. As a professor of literature and a Jew stripped of his academic post under Nazi rule, Klemperer turned to his diary to record a linguistic world collapsing under ideological pressure. From 1933 to the end of the

[159] Klemperer, V. (2000). The Language of the Third Reich: A Philologist's Notebook. London: Continuum.

war, he carefully noted the shifts in everyday German, documenting how ordinary words were repurposed, how new phrases emerged, and how propaganda colonised speech. His insight was clear: language was not merely a vehicle for Nazi ideology; it was its engine. Under the Third Reich, the German language was reshaped to reflect and spread the worldview of the regime. Every day phrases were infused with militarism, nationalism, and pseudo-scientific authority. Terms like 'fanatical' or 'heroic' became praise words, even when attached to acts of cruelty or mass death. Bureaucratic euphemisms such as 'special treatment' and 'final solution' cloaked the horror of extermination behind sterile language. Klemperer observed how these linguistic distortions did not just communicate policy—they shaped it. Once an act could be described in bloodless, official language, it could more easily be accepted. This was not a uniquely German phenomenon. Klemperer's observations resonate with George Orwell's concept of Newspeak in '1984', where language is deliberately reduced and distorted to limit thought and suppress dissent. The fewer the words, the fewer the concepts. If the language of rebellion is erased, so too is the possibility of rebellion. In both cases, words are not neutral—they are shaped to shape. The same logic appears in the Soviet Union and Maoist China, where state-controlled language was central to consolidating power. Slogans, party speak, and rigid definitions ensured that only one vision of the world could be spoken, and therefore only one could be imagined. Klemperer understood that these changes were not limited to official documents or speeches. They seeped into conversation, into schoolbooks, into signs, letters, and jokes. The true power of the Nazi language was its ordinariness. The more familiar the terms became, the more effective they were at altering perception. The terrifying aspect of this transformation was how unconscious it could be. People used the new words because everyone else did, unaware that their speech habits were guiding their thoughts. Klemperer insisted that totalitarian language is most dangerous when it becomes everyday language. This process exemplifies a broader social mechanism: when people accept a definition of the world—even one rooted in distortion—it changes what they do. The concept is central to what sociologists call reflexivity. A definition becomes real in its consequences. Language, in this view, is not simply descriptive but creative. It makes reality rather than mirrors it. The manipulation of language thus becomes a form of social engineering. What Klemperer witnessed was not just linguistic drift but social alchemy—where speech remakes the speaker, and public consensus is built on the ruins of free thought. In such systems, words are tools of transformation. They do not just describe people—they decide their fate. A man labeled an 'enemy of the state' becomes one, regardless of what he has done. A woman called 'degenerate' loses her rights, her job, her safety. These labels, repeated in official language and then in common speech, have the power to displace truth with a more convenient fiction. This is how operational success replaces objective truth. It does not matter whether the terms are accurate—only whether they work. If calling someone a threat justifies their removal, the label achieves its purpose. Klemperer's diary offers a slow-motion study of this process. He records how even his fellow Jews began to use the language of their persecutors, internalising the worldview that condemned them. Resistance, he argued, must begin with the smallest act: refusing to speak the words that distort. For Klemperer, reclaiming language was not just a moral duty but an act of survival. His notebook reminds us that totalitarianism begins in grammar, that dictatorship finds its roots in the sentence.

What the Nazi language can teach us?

In his 2017 article[160], José M. Ariso explores how Victor Klemperer's analysis of Nazi language can illuminate Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of certainty, revealing how totalitarian regimes manipulate linguistic norms to fix meaning and suppress doubt. Victor Klemperer's 'LTI – Lingua Tertii Imperii: Notizbuch eines Philologen' (1947) is both a diary and a philological study of how language was weaponised under the Nazi regime. The book's title refers to the 'Language of the Third Reich', and Klemperer uses the acronym LTI as a symbolic knot in his memory, a private code to survive a world collapsing into madness. Initially a joke, LTI soon became his shield—a means of observing and documenting how language itself turned into an instrument of terror. From the start of Nazi rule, German began to shift. Klemperer saw that speech was not just shaped by power but used to shape it. Words that once had clear, everyday meanings were now laced with menace or grandeur. Bureaucratic terms replaced direct language. Simple things were renamed with abstract or pseudo-scientific expressions that distanced people from reality. The regime flooded public life with a monotonous, orchestrated vocabulary that quickly became second nature—even for its victims. Language no longer described the world; it reconstructed it in the image of the Party. Klemperer studied how Nazis spoke, how ordinary workers spoke, and how the persecuted, including himself, slowly began to mirror that same poisoned speech. It was not just propaganda speeches that carried influence, but the subtle repetition of keywords and slogans in daily life. The real danger, Klemperer warns, lies in how these words infiltrated unconscious thought. People used them automatically, unaware of the values embedded in them. The word 'fanatical', for example, once negative, became a virtue. The constant repetition of this kind of vocabulary reshaped what was admirable and what was shameful. As he writes, words are like arsenic—taken in small doses, unnoticed, until it is too late. Language did not simply serve the regime—it was the regime. Klemperer saw that Nazi language—LTI—was more than a collection of phrases. It was a system designed to shape the world as people saw it. Instead of encouraging thought, it demanded obedience. Everyday language was filled with slogans, idioms, and phrases that were constantly repeated until they became second nature. Over time, people stopped questioning the ideas behind the words. In the sense proposed by Wittgenstein, the Nazi language created new certainties—things that no one thought to doubt because they were embedded in how people lived and spoke. Wittgenstein suggested that certainties are not chosen through logic. They grow with us, embedded in our early learning and social world. They become the foundations of our belief system—so basic that we cannot imagine a world without them. Nazi propaganda took advantage of this structure. It inserted new certainties through repetition and emotional intensity, bypassing conscious reasoning. The regime's language split the world in two: good and evil, Aryan and Jew, friend, and enemy. Complexity vanished. Doubt was painted as weakness or betrayal. By using strong emotional appeals, the Nazi state fused language with action. People came to act not because they reasoned, but because the words they heard every day told them who they were and what they must do. Language shaped identity. Klemperer also noted that these certainties were not uniform across all individuals. Some believed deeply; others went along out of fear. Still, the language worked on both groups. Even victims began to internalise its values. This shows the strength of what Wittgenstein called the 'worldpicture'—a background of understanding so deep that questioning it feels impossible. The language did not need to win arguments; it needed only to be everywhere, repeated constantly. Ariso points out that changing these certainties is not easy. People rarely switch

[160] Ariso, J. M. (2017). What the Language of the Third Reich – as described by Klemperer – can teach us about certainties in Wittgenstein's sense. Inquiries into Philosophical Pragmatics, 6(1), 37–55.

worldpictures through debate. They might resist at first, but change—when it comes—is slow and painful. It involves reshaping identity, breaking with familiar ways of speaking, and thinking. That is why Klemperer believed that certain words from the Nazi era should be buried permanently. They carry poison, not just in meaning but in the feelings they still evoke. What disturbed Klemperer most was that the language outlived the regime. Even after 1945, he heard echoes of Nazi diction in democratic speeches. Expressions that had once been filled with hatred and hierarchy continued to circulate, untouched by their past. Language shapes thought, and when it becomes the tool of ideology, it can lead people to accept the unacceptable. Through his diary, he shows that resisting begins with listening, analysing, and refusing to let words dictate one's soul. Klemperer's account of LTI shows how language does more than describe the world. It builds it. The Nazis understood this and used it to powerful effect. As José María Ariso explains, their manipulation of language transformed basic beliefs into tools of domination. These beliefs—what Wittgenstein called certainties—are not easily shaken. They are learnt through immersion and held without question. When language is used to fix such beliefs, it becomes one of the most dangerous weapons of all. Such language shapes a society united in its hatred of those deemed "less human," making speech itself a tool for measuring a person's or group's humanity and deciding how they should be treated. 'The propagandist's purpose is to make one set of people forget that certain other sets of people are human', said Aldous Huxley.

8. Conclusion: DISCOMMUNICATION

8.1. Lingua Perversa

(The perverse language: Speaking against the soul)

'But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought'.

— George Orwell

'The degradation of language is the first step toward the degradation of man'.

— Octavio Paz

'The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom, but a perverse tongue will be cut out. The lips of the righteous know what is fitting, but the mouth of the wicked speaks perversity'.
Proverbs 10:31-32

Lingua Perversa

Not all words are acceptable in every situation; speech without discernment becomes a danger rather than a gift. The use of language demands self-discipline, for every utterance carries the weight of timing, context, and consequence. In the world of Homo loquens, a single word can lead to exile or death more swiftly than a misstep in the jungle. In Proverbs 10:31–32, the Bible draws a sharp line between righteous and wicked speech: 'The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom, but a perverse tongue will be cut out. The lips of the righteous know what is fitting, but the mouth of the wicked speaks perversity'. These verses form part of the biblical tradition that treats language not as neutral, but as morally charged. Words reveal character. The righteous speak in harmony with divine wisdom, while the wicked use language to distort, provoke, or rebel. The 'perverse tongue' stands as a symbol of spiritual defiance—

speech that resists correction, mocks righteousness, and corrupts others by its influence. The contrast presented is not simply between good and bad manners, but between speech that pleases God and speech that earns judgment. In biblical understanding, the righteous are not just morally upright; they are careful with words, aware of their weight and consequences. They speak what is 'acceptable'—that is, what fits the time, the person, the setting, and most importantly, what is pleasing to the Lord. In contrast, the wicked speak 'frowardness'—language marked by disobedience, pride, and rebellion. Scripture does not treat speech as a secondary issue but as central to spiritual life. Speech is how truth is declared, how relationships are formed, how justice is upheld—or undermined. A perverse tongue is not just misleading; it is spiritually dangerous. As Proverbs makes clear, it will be 'cut out'. Not merely condemned, but silenced, removed, judged. The righteous, however, 'know what is acceptable'. This knowledge is not innate; it must be taught and cultivated. It is learnt through humility, reverence, and alignment with divine instruction. The Bible consistently teaches that not all words are acceptable. What one says—and how, when, and why one says it—matters to God. Words are weighed not only by their truth but by their tone, timing, and effect. Christians are called to speak in a way that reflects the wisdom and character of God, not the restlessness and pride of the world. As Psalm 19:14 prays: 'Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer'. The righteous do not speak merely to be heard, or to win, or to wound. They speak to glorify God. In an age of constant expression, where speech is often reckless and unexamined, this teaching demands a return to reverence. Not all speech is fit for use, and not all language should be uttered, even if true. Self-censorship, in this biblical sense, is not repression—it is worship. To guard one's tongue is to honour the God who listens. Acceptable words are a fountain of peace; but the undisciplined tongue stirs judgment. He who guards his mouth honours the Lord; but he who speaks without measure walks toward ruin.

'The Pervert's Guide to Language'

Perversion, as Slavoj Žižek insists in an interview[161], is not about sexual deviation. Rather, it is a formal position, a structural mode of relating to language, law, and desire. Words like 'perversion' are themselves social constructions—contingent conventions that shift across history. What counts as perverse in one era may become the norm in another. Yet beneath these changing definitions lies a more fundamental act: the true perversion occurs not when one passively transgresses, but when one actively, even joyfully, chooses to violate the symbolic order in the name of freedom, power, or truth. This is the 'lingua perversa'. Real perversion, then, begins internally. It starts with an inner voice declaring: 'I will break the rule—because I dare'. This is not rebellion for pleasure's sake, nor sin out of ignorance. It is the cold, rational decision to trespass against the sacred, not to destroy the law but to test the subject's own sovereignty. It is, in Žižek's words, the moment when the subject experiences themselves as the instrument of another's enjoyment—but also as the author of their own transgression. This is why, paradoxically, modern subjectivity finds enjoyment in duty itself. Not in the law, but in the obscene supplement of the law—the pleasure that emerges from submitting to it or defying it with full awareness. Take the example of the father, in Žižek's oft-cited anecdote, who finally delivers his family to the picnic spot after a day of frustration, only to command: 'Now you better have fun'. Here, enjoyment has become an imperative. Failure to enjoy is now the true

[161] The Žižek Times (2025). Slavoj Žižek: Perversion has nothing to do with sexual perversion. [online] YouTube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ry8RlkmNaJc [Accessed 5 Aug. 2025].

sin, and the subject feels guilt not for breaking moral rules, but for not fulfilling the social command to be happy. In late capitalist culture, pleasure is no longer optional—it is obligatory. But this obligatory enjoyment becomes itself a site of anxiety, failure, and pathology. One does not feel guilty for betraying the superego, but for failing to meet its increasingly paradoxical demands. This same logic applies to intimacy and the public-private divide. What was once secret is now exhibition. In today's digital culture, private acts—whether emotional, sexual, or excretory—are not simply exposed; they are aestheticised, shared, and commodified. Yet this does not produce liberation. It creates a new space of isolation, a solipsistic collectivisation, in which individuals are hyper-visible yet radically alone. Žižek's example of webcams in toilets, or celebrities whose intimate lives are indistinguishable from their public image, is not just grotesque—it is diagnostic. The subject is no longer hidden from the big Other, but is instead absorbed into a perverse field of total visibility that no longer distinguishes between authentic intimacy and socialised performance. Against this backdrop, Žižek offers an unlikely proposal: to reclaim subjectivity not through secrecy, but through public commitment. True privacy, he suggests, no longer lies in withdrawal from the gaze, but in the political courage to assert one's love or belief publicly. The ceremony of marriage, for instance, is not merely a legal act but a performative declaration—'I dare to say it aloud'. It is a minimal socialisation of intimacy, a reclaiming of meaning within a perverse symbolic order that otherwise turns even enjoyment into a trap. Thus, 'The Pervert's Guide to Language' is not a manual of forbidden desires, but a diagnosis of how power, duty, intimacy, and speech have become entangled in perverse structures. Real perversity is not in breaking the rules unconsciously, but in deliberately confronting, inverting, and owning them. Like Jacob Frank's antinomianism—where followers were required to transgress in order to fulfil a higher spiritual calling—our perversion today is to speak, act, and enjoy against the grain of what we are told to want. That is 'lingua perversa': the wilful corruption of language, not as error, but as experiment. In the 2012 documentary 'The Pervert's Guide to Ideology', philosopher Slavoj Žižek argues that true ideology is not what we consciously believe, but the invisible structure that dictates what we must enjoy and how we must desire. In this sense, language itself becomes ideological when it masks command as freedom and obligation as pleasure—making lingua perversa the medium through which ideology reproduces itself.

Distortion in language

Language is meant to help people understand each other. But the act of communication is rarely clean or simple. Meaning often bends, shifts, or breaks between sender and receiver. This is not always because someone is lying or confused. Rather, it is the structure of communication itself that leads to distortion. A message, even when carefully crafted, often changes shape as it travels through different minds, environments, and social settings. One of the key contributors to distortion is noise. Noise, in communication theory, does not just mean sound. It refers to anything that interferes with a message. This could be loud music in a café, bad handwriting, or even an unstable internet connection. But noise is also internal. A person's hearing difficulty, wandering attention, emotional state, or preconceived beliefs can all interfere with how a message is received. These forms of noise—physical, physiological, psychological, and semantic—can break the connection between words and meaning. Semantic noise is the most subtle but also the most powerful. It emerges when language fails to match understanding. Words can be ambiguous, phrases misinterpreted, or context missing. Two people can use the same sentence and mean completely different things. As a result, meaning slips—sometimes slightly, sometimes entirely. A helpful analogy comes from signal processing. In electronics, distortion happens when a signal is changed from its original form. Think of a video that glitches

or a voice on a call that crackles and warps. The basic structure is there, but something is off. Engineers design systems to minimise this. Still, distortion persists. In fact, some systems even use distortion deliberately. Noise reduction tools, like those found in audio equipment, sometimes introduce their own changes to better counteract interference. In music, distortion is used creatively—especially with electric guitars—to produce specific sounds that would not occur naturally. This idea translates well to language. Communication is never pure. Like a distorted audio track, what reaches the listener is never exactly what the speaker intended. And in some ways, this is just how language works. Interpretation always involves reconstruction. The listener does not just receive a message—they rebuild it based on memory, emotion, context, and prior knowledge. That reconstruction process is where distortion happens. Social theorist Jürgen Habermas takes this further. He argues that distortion is not just technical or accidental. It is built into the very structure of language in society. For him, communication is shaped by power, ideology, and institutional norms. These factors influence not just what people say, but how they say it, who is allowed to speak, and how their speech is received. In this view, distortion is systematic. It is not a glitch in the system—it is the system. Every message carries the imprint of the structures that produced it. This reframes distortion not as an error to be corrected, but as a normal feature of communication. Language is filtered through individuals and institutions. Messages are shaped by political, cultural, and emotional forces. And meaning is always a negotiation, not a fixed transmission. The dream of perfectly transparent language—a message sent, a message received, unbroken—is just that: a dream.

Deception as a function of language

In the 2020 article 'Deception as a Derived Function of Language[162]', Nathan Oesch argues that deception is not merely a misuse of language but one of its evolved, adaptive functions. He explores how linguistic complexity enables nuanced forms of lying, suggesting that the capacity to deceive may have co-evolved with language to serve social and survival advantages in human groups. Language is often held up as the feature that most clearly separates humans from other species. While many animals communicate through sounds, gestures, or signals, only humans can build meaning using vast vocabularies and grammar. One theory suggests that the original purpose of language was deception, that it evolved to manipulate others. But according to Nathan Oesch, this view does not fully capture the social role of human language. In his research, Oesch argues that deception is a secondary function, emerging later in language's development, with social bonding being its primary purpose. The roots of the deception theory can be found in animal communication studies. In some species, deceptive behaviour can be observed. Monkeys, for instance, have been seen giving false alarm calls to scare others away from food. Theorists like Richard Dawkins and John Krebs have suggested that animal signals are part of a constant struggle between manipulation and resistance—a sort of evolutionary arms race. However, deception in animals tends to be limited to specific situations. It is not the dominant feature of their communication systems. When applied to humans, this framework becomes more complex. Deception certainly exists, but it is not as widespread or central as the manipulation model would imply. People tell the truth during daily conversations. Studies in developmental psychology show that children begin lying for self-gain around age four to seven, but these early lies are often replaced or balanced by so-called 'white lies' meant to preserve relationships or protect others from hurt. These social lies reveal that deception, in many human contexts, is not simply selfish but often has a cooperative

[162] Oesch, N. (2020) 'Deception as a Derived Function of Language', Adaptive Human Behaviour and Physiology, 6(4), pp. 371–386.

dimension. Rather than seeing deception as the original purpose of language, it makes more sense to view it as a side effect of a system designed for social coordination. Language allows people to build shared understandings, maintain group cohesion, and navigate the complexities of social life. In this view, deception is a derived function—a capacity that emerged only after language had already developed for more prosocial purposes. This theory fits well with broader perspectives on human evolution. As humans became more socially complex, language helped individuals coordinate, share knowledge, and build trust. Deception became useful in certain contexts, but it depended on the existence of trust to be effective. If everyone expected lies, language would break down. That trust exists at all suggests that language evolved to serve cooperation first. In conclusion, Oesch's argument reframes the function of language as primarily social rather than manipulative. While deception is part of the human communication toolkit, it is a later adaptation. The origin of language, then, is not best understood as a weapon of deceit, but as a bridge for bonding and collaboration. But deception is entering the picture when social advantage demands it.

How words can betray rational thinking

Semantic distortions arise when the meaning of words shifts according to personal beliefs, emotional states, or cultural backgrounds. While language aims to convey meaning and enable communication, words often become distorted mirrors of thought, betraying the very clarity they are supposed to offer. As Eldon Taylor explains in 'Semantic Distortions: How Words Can Betray Rational Thinking[163]', this distortion frequently happens without conscious intent, becoming part of a person's automatic cognitive processes. It operates so subtly and deeply that even trained professionals must actively guard against its influence in their thinking and language use. Semantics, the study of meaning in language, assumes that words correspond to shared concepts. But meanings are rarely fixed. Words trigger responses not only on an intellectual level but also physiologically and emotionally. A single word might produce calm in one person and anxiety in another, depending on their history, worldview, or mental state. For example, a word like 'freedom' may evoke pride and empowerment in one person, while in another, it may conjure fear of instability or loss. These divergent responses are not the result of misunderstanding or ignorance, but rather of the unique contexts in which each person forms their internal dictionary. This internal anchoring of meaning becomes dangerous when it blocks rational thought. Taylor points out that people often confuse emotional responses with logical conclusions. Words, when loaded with emotion, take on the illusion of truth. They begin to feel like facts rather than signs representing ideas. This is what Alfred Korzybski meant when he observed that modern society has become 'false to fact'. Words are mistaken for the things they name, even though they are not those things. They are symbols, limited and shaped by human interpretation. The consequences of this can be subtle or profound. For instance, terms like 'criminal', 'terrorist', or 'patriot' carry not just descriptive but evaluative weight. They create instant judgments. Someone may hear a political phrase and respond with strong emotion, convinced of their interpretation's correctness, unaware that the emotional reaction itself is guiding their belief. The problem deepens when this becomes internalised. Our own self-talk—what William James called the 'stream of consciousness'—is shaped by the same semantic habits. If someone believes they are a failure, that word may become tightly anchored to shame and inadequacy, even when external evidence contradicts it. Taylor warns that this automatic distortion disables reason. Language becomes a vehicle not for truth but for reinforcing subjective narratives. Even words grounded in science or mathematics, like 'gallon' or 'equal',

[163] Taylor, E. (2012) Semantic Distortions: How Words Can Betray Rational Thinking, HuffPost.

are not immune. A gallon of alcohol mixed with a gallon of water does not yield two gallons of liquid. The logic of quantity fails because the substances interact in complex ways. Similarly, the logic of language fails when we assume that words neatly align with reality. This problem is especially visible in public discourse. Debates around justice, equality, or freedom are often derailed not by facts, but by competing definitions. One side uses a word with one emotional and cultural meaning, while the other uses the same word with a different one. But because neither side acknowledges the distortion, dialogue fall apart. Semantic distortion becomes a wall rather than a bridge. In conclusion, semantic distortions are a deep-seated challenge to communication and rational thought. Words carry emotional, cultural, and personal baggage that shapes how they are interpreted, both by others and by oneself. These hidden forces can turn language into a tool of confusion rather than understanding. Recognising the presence of semantic distortion can help people pause before reacting, reconsider meanings, and move toward clearer, more thoughtful dialogue.

Language and distortion of reality

Language does more than describe the world; it helps build it. The words people choose, the structures of their sentences, and the meanings they attach to speech all shape what they perceive as real. Rather than serving as a neutral mirror of reality, language organises experience and gives form to what might otherwise remain vague or unseen. It guides how humans interpret the world and, just as often, how they misinterpret it. When people speak, they rely on shared systems of meaning. But this system is not fixed or transparent. Every language comes with limitations. Words are not perfect representations of things or experiences. They compress, exaggerate, or simplify what they describe. In 'Semantic Distortions' Eldon Taylor observes that the meanings attached to words are often emotional, not rational. This emotional anchoring shifts the way people understand the world and each other. This distortion becomes clearer when emotionally charged language is used. Terms like 'freedom', 'justice', or 'security' do not have single, universal definitions. Each speaker loads these terms with their own values and experiences. The result is that two people can use the same word but mean completely different things. Miscommunication occurs not because of ill will, but because language carries invisible assumptions. Language also distorts by setting boundaries. It divides reality into categories. Once a label is applied to something—'enemy', 'victim', 'expert'—it changes how others treat that person or idea. These categories are not neutral; they carry historical weight, cultural expectation, and emotional force. Labelling is a way of fixing meaning, and that fixed meaning can be used to control, limit, or mislead. Even in science or law, fields that claim objectivity, language shapes outcomes. The way data is presented, the metaphors used to describe a legal case, or the phrasing of a policy—all of these can tilt interpretation. Language gives things importance or diminishes them through tone and framing. What is not said can matter as much as what is. Silence or omission distorts reality just as much as biased words do. Everyday language also distorts internal experience. People talk to themselves using the same language patterns they hear around them. If those patterns are filled with fear, judgment, or confusion, the internal dialogue becomes distorted too. A person might describe themselves as 'a failure' not because it is true, but because the language available to them has taught them to speak in extremes or labels. Language does not have to be intentionally manipulative to distort reality. The distortion can come from vagueness, ambiguity, or habit. Sloppy language leads to sloppy thinking. Clichés, slogans, and euphemisms flatten nuance. They reduce complex issues into phrases that are easy to repeat but hard to unpack. In conclusion, language is not a passive tool. It does not simply reflect reality; it constructs it. Words frame the world. They filter what is seen, understood, and acted upon. This makes language both powerful and dangerous. It can

open understanding, but it can also narrow perception and cement misunderstandings. To communicate clearly, one must be aware not only of what is being said, but of how language itself shapes what can be thought and known.

Good for lawyers and bad for scientists

Language gives people the power to persuade, argue, and construct meaning. But it is not always the best tool for describing reality. In his book 'Why Language Is Good for Lawyers and Bad for Scientists[164]', N. J. Enfield shows how language is better suited to shaping perceptions than presenting facts. Lawyers use language to argue, influence, and win cases. Scientists, by contrast, need to describe reality as precisely and clearly as possible. That makes language a double-edged sword—valuable in the courtroom, problematic in the lab. Words are rarely neutral. They do not just describe something; they frame it. A skilled lawyer can take the same set of facts and present them in multiple ways, depending on the desired outcome. By using carefully chosen words, they can evoke sympathy, suspicion, or outrage. Language here works like a spotlight, directing attention and shaping emotional reactions. It is flexible, ambiguous, and often deliberately selective. Scientists, however, need stability and clarity. Their goal is not to persuade, but to observe and explain. Yet even in science, words are essential. A scientist must describe their observations, define terms, and build arguments. But the imprecision of language introduces room for error. Terms may be misunderstood. Jargon may exclude outsiders. Vague definitions can lead to confusion or misinterpretation. In this sense, language may obscure rather than reveal the truth. Enfield also shows that language changes how people remember and think. A well-told story can stick in the mind more than raw data. Memory, influenced by the language in which it is encoded, becomes shaped by narrative. This makes language a powerful tool for propaganda, misinformation, or emotional manipulation. People often believe what they hear repeated with confidence, even if it contradicts facts. This is why language plays such a key role in politics, law, media, and advertising. The aim is rarely to tell the whole truth. Instead, language is used to shape belief, justify action, and construct meaning. In this world, ambiguity is not a problem—it is an advantage. The more room a word or phrase leaves for interpretation, the easier it is to bend its meaning to fit different goals. Scientists must resist this temptation. They aim for precision, replicability, and objectivity. That is why science often turns to mathematics and symbols to escape the ambiguity of natural language. Still, even scientific writing must use words, and that means it is never entirely free from distortion. Every description is filtered through a human mind and a cultural language. In the end, Enfield argues that language shapes not just how we communicate, but how we reason. It filters what we notice, what we remember, and how we explain things. That makes it both powerful and dangerous. Lawyers thrive in this ambiguity. Scientists struggle with it. To use language well is to understand its limits. It can persuade and inspire, but it can also mislead. It is not a mirror of reality—it is a blunt tool.

Beyond hypocrisy

Edward S. Herman's 'Beyond Hypocrisy: Decoding the News in an Age of Propaganda[165]' is a sharp critique of the language and logic that underpin modern political and media discourse. The book dissects how public communication in the United States is shaped by carefully

[164] Enfield, N.J. (2022) Language vs. Reality: Why Language Is Good for Lawyers and Bad for Scientists. MIT Press.
[165] Herman, E.S. (1992) Beyond Hypocrisy: Decoding the News in an Age of Propaganda, Boston: South End Press.

constructed doublespeak. It highlights how the meaning of words is manipulated to support state and corporate power, turning language itself into a tool of control. Through selective phrasing, euphemism, and suppression, the news becomes less a reflection of reality and more a means of shaping public opinion in favour of those already in power. Doublespeak, Herman argues, is not simply lying. It is the deliberate use of ambiguous or misleading language to obscure meaning. Euphemisms like 'enhanced interrogation', 'collateral damage', or 'regime change' serve to sanitise brutality and make it palatable. In an era where advertising, marketing, and public relations define much of the public sphere, political messaging borrows heavily from commercial language. Leaders are sold like products, and issues are framed not for clarity, but for persuasion. A central concern in the book is how media institutions align with political and economic elites. News coverage is rarely neutral. Rather, it is structured to reflect the interests of those who fund and influence media platforms—advertisers, corporations, and governments. As a result, the public often receives a distorted view of the world. This distortion is not always in the form of censorship; more often, it takes the shape of omission, misdirection, and the framing of events in ways that support official narratives. The media's role in foreign policy is a particularly strong example. Herman examines how U.S. interventions—like those in Nicaragua, El Salvador, or Iraq—are justified using moral rhetoric about democracy and human rights. Meanwhile, allied regimes committing similar or worse offenses are treated more favourably. The same actions, such as suppressing dissent or rigging elections, are condemned or excused depending on who commits them. This double standard is made possible through the manipulation of language and the repetition of official talking points across news outlets. Herman also draws attention to how the idea of 'free speech' is often hollow. While the First Amendment may protect speech in theory, real access to the public sphere is limited by money, ownership, and institutional bias. Marginal voices struggle to break through, while mainstream media serve as gatekeepers, filtering dissent and amplifying dominant views. The idea of a 'free flow of information' is undermined by the concentration of media ownership and the economic pressures that shape coverage. One of the book's most sobering insights is how propaganda can succeed not through fear or force, but through routine language and presentation. Repetition, familiarity, and the appearance of normality help reinforce the status quo. People come to accept contradiction, justify injustice, and ignore suffering, not because they are coerced, but because the language surrounding them has been engineered to do so.

The end of history?

In the chapter 'The End of History?' from 'Beyond Hypocrisy', Edward S. Herman critiques the post–Cold War narrative that the triumph of liberal democracy marked the definitive close of ideological struggle. He argues that this idea was actively shaped by media and political elites, employing 'doublespeak' and selective framing to recast history as linear and inevitable. Even as contradictions persisted the mainstream outlets endorsed this narrative revealing how propaganda, language manipulation, and hypocrisy manufacture consensus around constructed endpoints. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the Western victory in the Gulf War led to a surge of confidence among political elites in the early 1990s. Many declared that ideological conflict had ended. Capitalism, they claimed, had triumphed for the last time. This sentiment was echoed in the belief that liberal democracy and market economies represented the final stage of human political development. But beneath this triumphalism lay deep contradictions. While the West celebrated, inequality grew, environmental crises deepened, and repression in the Global South continued, often with Western support. Edward S. Herman challenges the popular narrative that capitalism's victory marked the natural conclusion of historical development. He reminds readers that the Cold War was not simply a

defence against Soviet aggression. From early interventions in the Russian Civil War to consistent opposition to Third World movements, the West acted aggressively to protect its interests. Social revolutions across Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia were often crushed through covert operations, economic warfare, or proxy wars. These were not isolated events, but part of a broader system to ensure Western dominance. In the wake of the Soviet collapse, the question shifted from 'who will contain the Soviets?' to 'who will contain the United States?' No longer constrained by a rival superpower, the U.S. expanded its global influence through military might, economic coercion, and alliances with compliant local elites. The language of democracy and free markets often masked policies that entrenched inequality and served corporate interests. The belief that market reforms would lead to prosperity has not held true for much of the world. In many regions, 'reform' meant dismantling previous gains in labour rights, public services, and social protection. The result was growing poverty, instability, and frustration. In this context, the market became an ideology in itself—unchallenged and self-justifying. Meanwhile, the West continued to rewrite history, casting itself as the defender of liberty while suppressing dissent and undermining popular movements. Environmental degradation has also accelerated under this market triumphalism. With growth and profit as central values, ecosystems are increasingly sacrificed for short-term gains. Governments often lack the strength or will to resist corporate pressure. The result is a global economy that consumes natural resources at an unsustainable rate, leaving the planet more vulnerable each year. Western policies, particularly during the Reagan and Bush administrations, emphasised deregulation and corporate expansion over environmental stewardship. Herman argues that the most profound threats today come not from failed ideologies but from unchecked power. The real struggle is not between capitalism and communism, but between the powerful and the powerless. The real locus of power today is not the battlefield or the parliament—it is language itself. As Edward S. Herman shows, deregulated corporate power has not merely privatised material space but has colonised virtual public space: mass media, search engines, and social networks where meaning is made and controlled. This is no longer just propaganda—it is a regime of 'discourse management', where dominant actors use doublespeak dictionaries to redefine reality. Like Humpty Dumpty, they declare that words mean what they choose them to mean, reshaping history, truth, and public consciousness through sheer repetition and framing. In this world, the greatest power of all is the power to define—to command not just resources or armies, but the language through which people understand themselves, others, and the world they live in. Language, in the hands of power, serves not to clarify but to obscure. If power is the opposite of love, then true love is silent.

To fear or fear not

There is a popular claim circulating online that the most repeated phrase across all religious texts is 'Do not be afraid'. While this may not be literally true—textual counts suggest otherwise—the emotional impact of these words is undeniable. Why do people respond so deeply to them? Because they are afraid. But what exactly do they fear? Is it real danger in the world—or the words themselves, spoken by those in power, designed to instil fear? Fear is not merely a biological response to physical threats; it is also a linguistic construct, crafted and reinforced through language by figures of authority. From parents to priests, shamans to presidents, people in power have long used words to shape fear. Sometimes it is protective: 'Don’t touch the fire'. But often it becomes manipulative: 'Obey, or you’ll suffer eternal damnation'. In such cases, language does not describe fear—it produces it. Daniel Everett’s 'Don’t Sleep, There Are Snakes' offers a striking contrast to how fear can be communicated differently. Among the Pirahã people of the Amazon, the phrase 'Don’t sleep, there are snakes'

is a common way to say goodnight. On the surface, it might sound threatening, but it is said with warmth and even laughter. It is meant to keep one alert to real dangers in the jungle, not to paralyze or dominate. The speaker is not trying to assert power over the listener, but rather to express communal care. The message is simple: be cautious, stay alive, but do not let fear consume you. There is no sermon, no punishment, no manipulation—only a shared awareness of reality. This example reveals a crucial distinction: fear can be rooted in love or wielded as control. The same words—'Be careful', 'Don't go there', 'Watch out'—can either protect or oppress, depending on the intent behind them and the emotional connection between speaker and listener. In the worst cases, language itself becomes the threat. When religious or political figures speak of enemies, punishment, or damnation, it is often not reality people fear—but the power of the words themselves. The voice of authority becomes more frightening than the danger it supposedly warns against. Ironically, the phrase 'Fear not' often emerges from this same tradition of authoritative speech. In religious texts, divine figures or angels usually utter it. Whether spoken to Abraham, Mary, or shepherds, it always comes at a moment of tension—when divine presence risks overwhelming the human psyche. But the command 'Fear not' is not merely comfort. It is also an instruction to resist the language of fear itself. In the Bible, it is not just the physical danger that must be overcome, but the psychological grip of fear—the kind that enslaves rather than enlightens. In this sense, the true enemy may not be danger itself, but the misuse of language to produce fear. When the words are crafted to dominate, to threaten, or to bind the listener to obedience, then fear becomes a tool of oppression. As Everett suggests through the Pirahã way of speaking, words can also prepare without terrifying, caution without controlling, and speak truth without manipulation. So, the deeper message of 'Fear not' may not be divine reassurance in the face of danger—it may be a linguistic rebellion. A reminder not to submit to the voice that uses fear to rule. Not to fear the jungle, but to fear the mouth that twists it into myth. And above all, not to fear the world more than the words spoken about it. The most important message in any act of speaking should be this: fear not the speaker, nor the words, nor the intentions behind them. In shared life, protection flows both ways—mutual care replaces domination. True danger lies not in language, but in what creeps silently in the dark: the snakes, the spiders, the real threats. Fear only what deserves fear. Empty words and hollow threats should hold no power. Let speech prepare, not paralyze.

8.2. Discomunication

(The end of fellowship: How communication becomes its own absence)

'Misunderstanding is not the failure of communication—it is its fundamental mode'.

— John Durham Peters, Speaking into the Air

'Communication has collapsed into its opposite: the administration of silence'.

— Jean Baudrillard, In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities

'Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet... this is not to say that there is no communication, but rather that communication is the stake in every relation of power'.

— Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume I

Discommunication

Discommunication is more than a refusal to speak. It is the deliberate dismantling of communion itself. The prefix 'dis-' carries the force of separation—apart, away, undone. When joined with 'communication', which shares roots with 'communion', it signifies not just a lapse in speech but the violent severing of a shared world. If communication is what makes society, family, and friendship possible, then discommunication is its undoing. It is not just silence, but strategic silence with the intent to isolate, dominate, and injure. It does not signify peace or retreat. Rather, it enacts a form of social death. The common concept of the silent treatment often disguises the deeper pathology of discommunication. It is usually defined as the withholding of speech following conflict. But this passive gesture becomes active when silence is used not to de-escalate tension or create space for reflection, but as a means of punishment. In this sense, discommunication is not about withdrawal but control. The discommunicator seeks to destabilise the other, to induce doubt, guilt, and anxiety by removing the possibility of dialogue. What remains is not a pause, but a void—one that the discommunicated person tries desperately to fill with explanations, apologies, or pleading. This psychological vacuum is the weapon. Without clear terms, the discommunicated subject spins in confusion. Discommunication operates by leveraging dependence. When the person on the receiving end relies on the discommunicator—emotionally, socially, or economically—the silence becomes not only unbearable but disorienting. There is no feedback, no recognition, no path forward. The subject is not simply ignored; they are unacknowledged. The impact is one of internal fragmentation, where the basic human need for connection is met with a denial so total it destabilises identity itself. At its core, discommunication is an act of domination masquerading as absence. The discommunicator does not merely disappear. They haunt. Their silence is not empty but filled with implication: that the other is unworthy, flawed, or irredeemable. And because there is no conversation, there is no way to contest, clarify, or repair. The silence becomes a trap. It disarms the target while maintaining the discommunicator's moral superiority. The longer the silence persists, the more power it acquires. In high-conflict relationships—especially those involving narcissistic or borderline personality traits—discommunication becomes a repeated pattern. It is not a breakdown but a tactic. Used cyclically, it conditions the other person into compliance, fear, or desperation. The unpredictability of communication followed by its abrupt withdrawal mimics the dynamics of emotional abuse. The victim internalises the silence, questioning their worth and seeking endlessly to regain favour. In this way, discommunication constructs a hierarchy where speech and recognition become privileges to be granted or withheld. But the harm extends beyond the private sphere. At the societal level, discommunication emerges in practices of exclusion, cancellation, and exile. Political and cultural life increasingly mirrors this tactic. Rather than engage with dissent, people withdraw, silence, block, and erase. Dialogue is replaced with judgment rendered through absence. What cannot be controlled through debate is managed by disengagement. The result is a public life fractured by mutual disacknowledgement. Different groups no longer miscommunicate—they cease communicating altogether. Discommunication, at this scale, becomes the architecture of polarisation. The social effects are corrosive. Without dialogue, there is no trust. Without trust, no solidarity. And without solidarity, society fragments into isolated enclaves of self-reinforcing belief. Each group regards the others not as opponents to be persuaded but as enemies to be ignored. The communal fabric unravels. What remains are

individuals speaking only to themselves, or only to those who mirror them. In this way, discommunication does not simply silence—it amputates. The psychological cost is borne by those most in need of recognition. To be discommunicated is to be rendered invisible. It is to occupy a space without name, without voice, without address. In familial or intimate contexts, this can resemble abandonment. In public life, it can resemble censorship. But the mechanism is the same: the refusal to relate. And with that refusal, one denies the basic conditions of shared human life. Discommunication is therefore not merely the opposite of communication—it is its negation. Where communication builds bridges, discommunication tears them down. It is the wilful destruction of reciprocity, the closing of the channel that makes mutual understanding possible. It does not aim to clarify but to obscure, not to resolve but to control. It does not forget—it erases. To resist discommunication is not merely to speak again. It is to refuse the logic of severance. It is to insist on presence, even when unwelcome. To reach out, even when rejected. True communion requires vulnerability, recognition, and risk. Discommunication avoids all three. That is its appeal—and its danger.

Punitive silence

Discommunication is more than mere silence. It is a deliberate and often abusive withdrawal of communication. Unlike a misunderstanding, discommunication signifies a breakdown in the bonds that link us, and more than a failure to speak, it reflects a collapse of community bonds. This tactic goes beyond simple disagreement. It is an intentional, controlling act designed to punish. The silent treatment might look like a temporary pause in contact. But discommunication is strategic. It creates anxiety, confusion, and a constant scramble to reconnect—while the discommunicator remains resolute in their silence. They exploit the natural need for social interaction to assert power and dominance. In highly charged relationships—especially those involving narcissists or individuals with borderline traits—discommunication becomes a weapon. The silent period may start after a minor disagreement. But the longer it goes on, the more the victim questions themselves, searching for explanations and ways to make things right. Without any clarity or resolution provided by the other person, that anxiety only grows. The result is emotional distress and an unbalanced power dynamic. This form of control is subtle yet insidious. Silence replaces conversation. The target is left without context or closure. They experience loneliness, self-doubt, anxiety, and potentially damaged self-esteem. Over time, the silence communicates a message louder than any words: 'You are not worth engaging with'. These patterns have been widely examined. Psychologist Kipling Williams notes that silent treatment causes intense emotional pain, sometimes rivalling physical suffering. Targets often speak of feeling invisible or erased from someone’s mind. In families, this tactic can fracture trust. Silent parents, for example, may experience short-term authority, but long-term damage to the child’s sense of security and communication. Discommunication affects not only the recipient but also the one imposing it. Recent studies by Shilpi Agarwal and Nidhi Prakash found that people who use silent treatment often carry guilt, stress, and tension. Even perpetrators may feel weighed down by their own avoidance of resolution. Yet they persist, using discommunication as a method to control and evade conflict. Healing from discommunication takes intention and courage. The first step is recognition: naming the behaviour for what it is, not excuse it as a simple argument. Victims need to set boundaries and ask for resolution—explicitly asking for clarity about why communication ceased and how it can resume. Without these clear terms, silence remains a form of emotional captivity, not a path toward reconciliation. In toxic relationships, walking away may be the healthiest option. Re-establishing communication only works when the discommunicator commits to open dialogue. Otherwise, silence will be used again at the next disagreement.

Discommunication is a form of communal breakdown. It weaponises silence to fracture trust, damage emotional well-being, and dissolve meaningful bonds. It turns absence into a statement, withdrawal into punishment. Recognising this tactic empowers both targets and observers to respond decisively—whether through repair, resistance, or removal from harmful cycles. Silence alone should never replace understanding and mutual respect in a community.

Collapse of dialogue

Discommunication, as an active withdrawal from dialogue, is not merely a private interpersonal strategy. It is a sociological rupture, a linguistic severing that simulates connection while enacting isolation. Where communication traditionally serves to build bonds—familial, communal, tribal—discommunication mimics these structures through performative signals while dissolving the very fabric of mutual understanding. At its core, discommunication weaponises the shell of language. It does not speak to convey meaning, but to control, discipline, and isolate. This makes it a social pathology, an imitation of sociality that functions as its denial. Originating as an extension of the psychological phenomenon known as the 'silent treatment', discommunication has become a widespread social tool. The silent treatment is typically defined as a refusal to engage verbally with someone following a conflict. It expresses disapproval and withdrawal. But discommunication goes further. It is not the absence of speech per se, but the active deployment of silence or empty language—commands, slogans, formalities—as a way of withholding communion. In this sense, it mirrors what Edward T. Hall called the 'silent language', a system of nonverbal cues that transmit culture and social expectations beneath the level of conscious awareness. But while Hall emphasised how these cues enable understanding, discommunication uses silence and minimalism to suppress it. In a society increasingly structured around digital communication, algorithmic speech, and bureaucratic interaction, discommunication becomes normalised. The speech acts of institutions, corporations, and even individuals begin to resemble machine language—directives without dialogue, responses without reciprocity. Phrases such as 'Your call is important to us', 'Thoughts and prayers', or 'As per our policy' operate as signs that simulate care or engagement, but do not build a relational bond. They are placeholders, signals in a system that prefers simulation over communion. These linguistic structures, far from facilitating understanding, function as shields behind which the speaker hides from the responsibilities of response. Viewed sociologically, discommunication signals the erosion of Gemeinschaft—community grounded in organic bonds—in favour of Gesellschaft—mechanical association based on function and exchange. In familial and tribal societies, silence holds a sacred value as a space of reflection or ritual. But in modern societies, silence often becomes a power play, used to withhold recognition. In abusive relationships, for example, discommunication is used to trigger panic, doubt, and cognitive dissonance. The silence is not neutral; it is charged with the threat of abandonment. It echoes with unspoken condemnation. The victim is left in a psychological wilderness, isolated not by physical distance but by linguistic exile. This form of linguistic abandonment has broader social consequences. It contributes to what Guy Debord called the 'society of the spectacle', where genuine human interaction is replaced by representations. Just as images substitute for experience, empty language substitutes for communion. Discommunication is a type of doublespeak in the Orwellian sense: it expresses the opposite of what it claims. It says 'we care' through standardised platitudes that eliminate any possibility of care. It says 'you matter' through systems that make response impossible. In this sense, discommunication is not only anti-social—it is post-social. Discommunication also intersects with ideology. In political discourse, public relations, and institutional rhetoric, language becomes increasingly dissociated from truth and mutual recognition. Instead, it

becomes instrumental. Language is reduced to slogans, policy jargon, and euphemisms. It no longer seeks understanding but compliance. Here, discommunication does not mean silence in the literal sense, but the presence of speech that silences—the flood of empty language that drowns meaningful dialogue. In this way, it mirrors the logic of command systems, where speech acts as a trigger rather than an invitation. The danger of discommunication is not just alienation, but the gradual erasure of the human as a communicative being. Language is not simply a tool for transmitting information. It is a social organ, a bond between people, a space in which recognition, disagreement, and reconciliation take place. When language ceases to be dialogical, humans cease to be communal. What remains is a network of monads, signalling to each other in scripts devoid of reciprocity. In a world dominated by surveillance, automation, and performative discourse, the risk is not merely miscommunication but miscommunion. Discommunication becomes the default—an absence of speech masked by the appearance of endless interaction. People tweet, post, message, reply—but often without communion. They speak into the void, or worse, into an echo chamber that only reflects their own image. Society begins to resemble a machine with social gestures: it processes signals but does not form relationships. Discommunication is not the breakdown of communication but its imitation. It uses the language of community to enforce distance. It uses the silence of reflection as a punishment. It mimics the speech of intimacy to obscure estrangement. To restore true communication, one must return to the ethic of dialogue: the willingness to listen, to respond, and to risk misunderstanding in the pursuit of shared meaning. Without this, society is no longer a community of people—it becomes a simulation of one. Discommunication replaces genuine dialogue with scripted gestures that imitate connection while enforcing separation. In simulating speech, it severs the social bonds language is meant to sustain. When speech is staged, the bond is broken; a voice without truth builds no bridge.

NLP Milton Model

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) often presents itself as a therapeutic tool for personal development and communication. However, at its core lies a systematic strategy of discommunication—language designed not to clarify, but to guide, blur, and manipulate. One of the most powerful and influential components of NLP is the Milton Model, inspired by the techniques of psychiatrist Milton H. Erickson. This model uses hypnotic and metaphorical language to bypass critical reasoning, subtly shape perception, and induce states of suggestibility. What appears as linguistic artistry often operates as a controlled distortion of dialogue—disguised influence cloaked in therapeutic intent. Milton Hyland Erickson (1901–1980) was a pivotal figure in the development of clinical hypnosis. His personal story—marked by early dyslexia, colour blindness, and a severe bout of polio—shaped his unorthodox understanding of human behaviour and communication. Rather than adhering to rigid Freudian models of the unconscious, Erickson viewed the unconscious as a flexible and resourceful ally capable of generating creative solutions. He believed that trance states were natural, everyday experiences and used indirect, permissive techniques—such as metaphor, humour, double binds, and confusion—to access this inner intelligence. Unlike authoritarian forms of hypnosis, Erickson's approach emphasised subtlety: he would tell symbolic stories or embed therapeutic suggestions in casual conversation. His capacity to observe behaviour and respond with linguistic precision allowed him to circumvent resistance and communicate with patients' unconscious minds. The therapeutic alliance was built not on confrontation, but on rapport, indirectness, and ambiguity. This indirect approach became the foundation for the NLP Milton Model—a structured attempt to replicate Erickson's hypnotic language patterns. The NLP Milton Model is a formalised toolkit of Ericksonian language strategies. Created by Richard

Bandler and John Grinder, the model systematises the 'magical' quality of Erickson's speech into identifiable, repeatable patterns. These include presuppositions, nominalisations, lack of referential specificity, and metaphorical framing—all aimed at inducing trance and bypassing conscious resistance. Unlike the NLP Meta Model, which seeks to recover precision and challenge vagueness, the Milton Model embraces vagueness. Its goal is not to analyse but to influence—subtly and often invisibly. At the heart of the model is a core assumption: that every behaviour serves a positive intention, and that people already have the internal resources they need to solve their problems. The role of the practitioner, then, is to facilitate access to those resources—not through logical explanation but through suggestive, permissive language. Phrases like 'You may begin to wonder how easily change can happen' or 'Some part of you already knows what to do' are typical. These utterances do not demand action; they evoke internal search, blur agency, and encourage compliance without resistance. Used skillfully, they create an illusion of autonomy while steering the subject's response. In this sense, the Milton Model exemplifies discommunication: it simulates openness and collaboration while controlling meaning through linguistic sleight of hand. Its elegance lies in its capacity to guide thought covertly. But this same elegance raises ethical concerns. By deliberately avoiding clarity and embedding suggestion, the model can easily become a tool of manipulation. Its power lies not just in what is said, but in what remains unsaid—what is implied, presupposed, or left open to unconscious completion. As a linguistic structure, the Milton Model reveals how language can be weaponised not through aggression but through gentleness. It teaches that discommunication is not always loud or forceful—it can be soft, seductive, and persuasive. What begins as therapeutic rapport can become a closed loop of influence, where ambiguity serves not as freedom but as control.

Conspicuous discommunication

In today's coaching and personal development industries, language is not just a vehicle of expression—it is a carefully engineered tool for influence. A striking example of this is found in the work of Al and Marilyn Sargent, whose article 'The Milton-Model: The Language of Influence and Being Artfully Vague[166]' offers a detailed guide to using deliberately ambiguous language patterns for persuasion. Marketed as a means for enhancing communication, what emerges instead is a system of controlled suggestion designed to bypass rational resistance. Rather than fostering mutual understanding or genuine dialogue, the language of the Milton Model operates as a mechanism for soft coercion, cloaked in the appearance of empathy and empowerment. Behind the polished jargon of 'unconscious competence' and 'nominalisations' lies a sophisticated linguistic strategy that, intentionally or not, treats people as means rather than ends. At the core of this system is the deliberate deletion, distortion, and generalisation of meaning. The NLP Milton Model borrows heavily from the hypnotic techniques of Milton Erickson yet strips them of therapeutic context and repurposes them for performance and manipulation. Nominalisations, such as 'healing', 'growth', or 'transformation', are used not to clarify goals, but to obscure them—relying on the client to project their own meaning into the void. The speaker makes statements so vague that they appear meaningful while concealing any fixed content. A sentence like, 'You may already be aware of the resources inside you', appears supportive, but in truth it avoids saying anything at all. It is precisely this vagueness that makes it so effective—it allows the speaker to imply insight, authority, and resonance without ever

[166] Sargent, A. and Sargent, M. (2021) The Milton-Model: The Language of Influence and Being Artfully Vague. Success Design International. Available at: https://www.repoweryourlife.com (Accessed: 25 July 2025).

being held accountable for precision. This strategy of discommunication—communication that simulates dialogue while evading its responsibilities—is embedded in every linguistic pattern of the Milton Model. For example, unspecified referential indices ('people can change') and unspecified verbs ('you can begin to experience') shift the burden of interpretation onto the listener. They are compelled to supply their own content, which creates the illusion that the speaker understands them deeply. In fact, the speaker understands nothing—they merely reflect, like a mirror, the listener's projections. Instead of genuine intersubjectivity, we find a closed circuit of self-reinforcing suggestion. Other tactics further reinforce this asymmetry. The use of presuppositions ('Before you realise how easy it is to change.') smuggles assumptions into discourse without opening them to question. Pacing and leading sequences—where obvious truths are followed by subtle suggestions—create agreement through structural manipulation. Embedded commands and tag questions ('You're feeling more focused now, aren't you?') embed suggestions inside the form of ordinary speech, bypassing critical faculties. These techniques are not random—they are consciously taught, practiced, and deployed, often under the guise of helping others. The effect of this language is not neutral. It masks authority in empathy, sells compliance as freedom, and replaces mutual understanding with subtle domination. Clients or listeners may feel empowered, but what they often experience is guided compliance: their inner world reorganised not through understanding, but through suggestion. In this way, the Milton Model becomes a tool not for communion, but for control—language used not to meet others in shared meaning, but to steer them toward goals they did not choose, framed as their own desires. Discommunication, in this form, is not a breakdown but a design. It is conspicuous because it hides in plain sight, wrapped in smiles and smooth voices, laced with metaphors of growth while narrowing the space for genuine response. To speak artfully vague is not always innocent—it can be a strategy to possess the listener's attention while quietly bypassing their judgment. In such a system, the goal is not dialogue, but influence; not truth, but effect.

'Alice in Wonderland' technique

The so-called 'Alice in Wonderland' technique is often traced back to a Scientology training drill known as 'Dear Alice', devised by L. Ron Hubbard. In this exercise, practitioners would read passages from 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland' aloud, aiming to deliver them as though they were their own words, with natural tone, pacing, and conviction. During Scientology's 'Operation Snow White' (a covert effort to infiltrate government institutions and eliminate unfavourable information about the church)— deceptive and manipulative tactics were employed, including fabricating narratives and silencing dissent. 'Alice in Wonderland' technique later appeared almost word-for-word in the 1963 CIA manual[167] KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation. The whimsical nonsense of Lewis Carroll's text provided an ideal template for confusion-based interrogation methods, potentially influencing not only intelligence work but also certain media strategies aimed at unsettling audiences before supplying a 'solution'. The 'Alice in Wonderland' technique was not merely a matter of reading aloud; it involved controlling tone, pacing, and intention until the delivery appeared entirely authentic to the listener. The whimsical absurdity of the text was deliberate, offering a constantly changing range of emotional tones that forced the mind to adjust. The essential skill was to project authority and certainty even when articulating nonsense. In its coercive application, the technique uses confusion as the primary gateway to influence. When a person's

[167] C.I.A. (2018) The Official C.I.A. Interrogation & Manipulation Manual: The Cold War KUBARK Files. Carlile Media, p. 77.

internal scripts—those mental routines that enable them to make sense of daily life—are disrupted by contradictory, chaotic, or emotionally disorienting inputs, their mind enters a temporary suspension. In that state, the brain, desperate for stability, attaches itself to the first coherent idea it encounters. This idea may be factual, fictitious, or entirely fabricated. Once the initial 'anchor' is accepted, subsequent suggestions are more readily embraced until the subject ceases to evaluate and begins to absorb. The method proved so effective that it appeared, almost verbatim, in mid-twentieth-century interrogation manuals, where it was repurposed as a 'softening' tool to dismantle existing mental frameworks and replace them with new ones—not to discover truth, but to substitute it. Contemporary digital environments replicate this process on a mass scale. Rather than experiencing a single disorienting exchange, individuals are exposed to a rapid sequence of stimuli: political outrage, an inspirational recovery narrative, luxury product advertising, a tragic confession, followed by humour. This deliberate 'emotional cycling' destabilises mental equilibrium, diminishing the capacity for critical reasoning and increasing receptivity to whatever message follows. Although presented as entertainment, the underlying objective is to fragment attention, exhaust logical faculties, and maintain a state of emotional volatility—conditions highly conducive to persuasion. Each peak and crash in emotional state primes the mind for the insertion of a narrative, whether in the form of a commercial offer, political slogan, or identity-based proposition. The operational sequence is consistent: disorder first, order second—for a price. The 'solution' provided after confusion is seldom confined to factual information; it is more often a lifestyle, a sense of belonging, or an entirely new identity. The recipient is told they are not merely acquiring a product or method, but becoming part of an exclusive group, distinct from the supposed masses outside it. Fear, hope, guilt, belonging, and renewed fear follow one another in a calculated loop. Research indicates that rapid emotional shifts can increase vulnerability to persuasive communication by nearly half, particularly when delivered by figures perceived as authoritative. Once the individual's identity is linked to the message, compliance becomes predictable: disagreement ceases to be a matter of opinion and becomes a threat to the self. What began as a theatrical reading drill could have evolved into a method of behavioural engineering embedded in advertising, influencer culture, political propaganda, and algorithmically curated digital content. The principle remains unchanged whether in an interrogation room or on a social media feed: disorient, insert, and reinforce. As the human brain has not adapted to filter such sustained novelty and manipulation, resistance is minimal. The 'Alice in Wonderland' technique is no longer concerned with teaching people to speak convincingly—it is concerned with determining what they believe, how they perceive themselves, and ultimately, who they become. The problem with this technique is that the 'interrogators' can become lost in the very depths of the 'rabbit hole' themselves. Falling into the Humpty Dumpty trap mens believing you command language, when in reality it commands you.

'Contrariwise', continued Tweedledee, 'if it was so, it might be; and if it were so, it would be; but as it isn't, it ain't. That's logic.'- Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There (1871)

Language as torture

In her article[168] 'Terrifying laughter: interrogation in Pinter's The Birthday Party and the CIA's 'Alice in Wonderland' (2021), Katja Stroke-Adolphe examines how Harold Pinter's

[168] Katja Stroke-Adolphe (2021). Terrifying laughter: interrogation in Pinter's The Birthday Party and the CIA's 'Alice in Wonderland'. Textual Practice, 37(1), pp.44–67. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236x.2021.1971753.

theatrical interrogation scenes uncannily echo real-world torture methods described in the CIA's KUBARK Interrogation and Counterintelligence Manual. Published in Textual Practice, the study draws on theatre analysis, political history, and testimony from Mohamedou Ould Slahi's Guantánamo Diary to show how nonsense, humour, and ontological destabilisation function as tools of both dramatic tension and psychological assault. Stroke-Adolphe situates Pinter's The Birthday Party in a disturbing continuum where organised linguistic confusion is deployed not to uncover truth, but to dismantle identity and enforce submission. In Pinter's interrogation scenes, language functions as both a weapon and a theatre of confusion. The interrogators Goldberg and McCann use torrents of language that appear meaningless yet operate with precision to unsettle and dominate. By dismantling logical continuity, they compel both Stanley—their victim—and the audience to search for a coherent "line" in the chaos. This search for order in disorder, for culpability in ambiguity, reproduces the interrogator's mindset: the compulsion to impose clarity through control, even at the cost of truth. Pinter thus turns theatrical indeterminacy into a mechanism of complicity. Laughter plays a central role in this dynamic. In the theatre, nonsensical exchanges can initially provoke humour, but that laughter quickly curdles when the audience realises it participates in the violence. This parallels the CIA's recognition that laughter can be an initial response to disorientation—a momentary release—before confusion becomes unbearable. In both theatre and interrogation, humour is a trap: a reflex that exposes vulnerability, signalling that destabilisation is working. Mohamedou Ould Slahi's 'Guantánamo Diary' provides a real-world account of this process. Subjected to a "special interrogation plan" that included isolation, humiliation, and staged absurdities, Slahi witnessed how interrogators relied on repetition, performance, and farcical role-play—often lifted from pop culture fantasies—to sustain the illusion of omnipotence. Like Goldberg and McCann, they insisted on rigid adherence to an "organisation's" line, embedding themselves in a fantasy of absolute order that masked their incompetence. Over time, their absurd scripts lost their power, becoming objects of ridicule to detainees. Yet the damage was already done: identity eroded, autonomy stripped away, reality replaced by a manufactured one. Pinter's stagecraft captures this cyclical collapse. Stanley's speech degrades under pressure; his questions vanish, his responses become disconnected sounds, and his sense of self dissolves until even his name is replaced by the nonsense label "Joe Soap." This "regression" aligns with the CIA's definition: a reversal of psychological development, reducing the subject to an infantile state. In 'The Birthday Party', the "birthday" is thus no celebration but a rebirth into the identity assigned by the interrogators—a reconstructed self designed for obedience. The brilliance—and horror—of Pinter's construction lies in how it implicates the audience in this process. By withholding definitive meaning, he makes them feel the interrogated's desperation to resolve confusion, and the interrogator's urge to impose it. Every laugh, every attempt to decode, mirrors the mechanics of control. The theatrical absurd thus reveals itself as a precise simulation of organised discommunication. The intersection of Pinter's art and the CIA's methods demonstrates that the confusion tactic is not confined to black sites and interrogation rooms; it belongs to a larger machinery of language manipulation. When the most powerful state apparatus in the world refines techniques of nonsense, indeterminacy, and destabilisation, these tools risk infecting public discourse itself. Once embedded, the "virus" of discommunication can spread through media, politics, and culture, reshaping how language functions at its core. This infection does not remain under the control of its creators. As with a Pandora's box, the release of linguistic destabilisation cannot be reversed. It mutates, slipping

beyond the grasp of those who first deployed it—whether CIA strategists or playwrights experimenting with ambiguity. What begins as an instrument of power can corrode the very structures that wield it, turning organised confusion into a general condition. In such a world, neither governments nor artists can claim immunity: the techniques they unleash will eventually interrogate them too. By pairing the CIA manual's conditions of 'shock, disorientation, profound fear, loss of self' with the staged confusion and paranoia of interrogation, theatre confronts the audience with their own complicity. In the society of the spectacle, where torture and killing are consumed as entertainment, language in mass society shatters any pretence to innocence. Language is never neutral; it renders you an unwilling accomplice. All who speak or listen belong to a "language regime"—and in that belonging, all are implicated in the crimes committed in its name.

Linguistic logic of social suicide

In his 1897 work 'Le Suicide: Étude de sociologie', Émile Durkheim defined suicide not simply as an individual act but as a deeply social phenomenon. He argued that suicide rates reflect the moral health of society, and that certain forms—such as egoistic, anomic, or altruistic suicide—arise from breakdowns in the individual's relation to the collective. Yet Durkheim framed this in sociological terms, as a matter of regulation and integration, not language. What happens, however, if suicide is understood linguistically—not only as a symptom of social disorder but as a communicative process, one that begins with words, narratives, and internal dialogues? Suicide, both individual and social, may be seen as a discursive act. It emerges from the failure of language to sustain communion, and from the rise of discommunication: a rupture in the shared symbolic world that holds people and societies together. Discommunication is not merely the absence of speech or understanding. It is a mode of symbolic severance. It occurs when the common codes that sustain mutual recognition and solidarity dissolve, and when language ceases to function as a medium of communion. Unlike simple miscommunication, which may still occur within a shared frame of reference, discommunication signals the loss of that frame altogether. In this sense, discommunication is not just a failure of meaning but a symptom of collective estrangement—a precondition for social suicide. Durkheim linked suicide to what he called anomie, a condition in which social norms lose their binding force, leaving individuals unmoored and disoriented. Anomic suicide arises when rapid social change disrupts the moral regulation of life. But in linguistic terms, anomie is a loss of narrative coherence. The individual no longer inhabits a shared story. Words cease to offer orientation. Meaning becomes unstable, contradictory, or altogether void. Under these conditions, suicide is not merely a reaction to suffering—it is a logical, even rational, conclusion to a breakdown in the communicative function of language. The individual decides to end life because no language remains in which life continues to make sense. This process scales. What occurs in the soul of one person may occur in the body of the whole. Societies that commit suicide do so through their discourse. The decay of political speech, the rise of cynical slogans, the multiplication of contradictory ideologies, and the erosion of ethical language all point to a symbolic disintegration. In such environments, public discourse becomes less about truth or understanding and more about control, spectacle, or despair. Language fragments into tribes. Each speaks to itself, and no one listens to the other. Dialogue becomes impossible. This is discommunication—not silence, but noise without meaning. It is the linguistic equivalent of Durkheim's anomie: speech stripped of communion. Signs of this process appear not only in political rhetoric but in art, literature, and popular culture. Decadent art movements do not merely reflect aesthetic innovation; they often signal a crisis in meaning. Transgressive language becomes a way to mimic or defy the very norms that have lost their power. Artistic

provocations, nihilistic slogans, ironic performances, and stylistic fragmentation reflect the collapse of a stable symbolic order. When words no longer bind people to shared commitments or aspirations, art and speech begin to mirror the void. They simulate life at the edge of meaning, rehearsing the logic of collapse. This is not a moral judgment but a semiotic one. When language becomes purely performative or reflexive, it ceases to refer to a common world. In such contexts, suicide—individual or collective—ceases to be an unthinkable act. It becomes narratively plausible. It becomes framed as a solution, a sacrifice, a protest, or a final gesture of agency. This narrative logic is embedded in the language itself. People speak of burnout, apocalypse, endgames, and collapse with a tone of resigned clarity. It is no longer unutterable that society might destroy itself. In fact, it is often already narrated. Words precede the act. The suicide is, in a real sense, already written. This is the danger of discommunication. When language ceases to be shared, it no longer preserves society—it prepares its disintegration. The rituals of speech, the slow work of interpretation, the ethical care of listening—these are the practices that make community possible. Their absence is not neutral. It creates a void that is soon filled by the cold logic of exit, withdrawal, or destruction. Durkheim understood that suicide is not only about despair but about meaning. It occurs when meaning fails to bind the self to the social. In linguistic terms, it occurs when the inner voice—already shaped by public language—finds no reason to continue. To prevent suicide, then, is to sustain a language in which life remains liveable. This applies to individuals and to societies alike. Discommunication names the moment before the fall when language still exists but no longer communicates. It is the simulation of speech, the imitation of communion. It offers commands, slogans, and echo chambers—but no understanding. In such a world, suicide is not only possible. It becomes predictable. And unless the symbolic tissue is rewoven—through acts of speech that genuinely seek communion—it becomes inevitable.

8.3. Language and sanity

(Naming the unsane: How labels distort thought)

'We do not deal with the world itself but with maps of the world, and these maps are constructed by language'.

— S.I. Hayakawa

'Words are not things, and meaning is not found in dictionaries'.

— Wendell Johnson,

'Science and Sanity'

Alfred Korzybski's 'Science and Sanity[169]' presents a deep critique of how language shapes human understanding and distorts perception. Everyday language is not only inadequate for scientific inquiry but also responsible for many of the misunderstandings and irrational behaviours. Language, as a symbolic system, necessarily abstracts from reality, and in doing so, distorts it. Humans too often forget this, confusing words with the things they represent.

[169] Korzybski, A. (1933) Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics. Institute of General Semantics.

Language does not mirror reality directly. Words are abstractions—maps, not the territory. Yet humans often act as if the word is the thing, ignoring the layered abstractions that stand between perception and the world. This tendency leads to 'semantic confusion', a condition where individuals react to words and categories rather than to specific, lived experiences. One of the core distinctions Korzybski made was between the 'insane' and the 'unsane'. The insane are pathologically detached from reality, but the unsane are simply misaligned. Their thinking is shaped by language habits that encourage rigid categories and static ideas. For example, labelling a person as 'smart' reduces a dynamic, changing human being to a fixed trait. This reduction leads not only to judgment but to misunderstanding and conflict. The 'unsane' person is not mad but trapped in a language that oversimplifies the world. Korzybski believed that this problem was systemic. The structure of natural languages, inherited from Aristotelian logic, relies heavily on binary distinctions and static definitions. These features are useful for managing daily life, but they are poorly suited to grasping complex, dynamic systems. Science, he argued, needs a different kind of language—one capable of representing relationships, processes, and degrees of change, rather than fixed essences. To move beyond these limitations, Korzybski called for a 'non-Aristotelian' system of thought. This would involve re-educating human perception through what he called 'consciousness of abstracting'—a mental discipline that reminds people they are always working with incomplete representations. He encouraged practices like indexing, dating, and using qualifiers to prevent generalisation. Instead of saying 'John is a liar', one might say 'John-2020 told a lie in this situation', recognising time and context as crucial factors in meaning. These practices were not only intellectual exercises but tools for mental hygiene. Korzybski saw semantic habits as deeply tied to emotional and behavioural patterns. When people misidentify symbols as reality, they are more likely to engage in reactionary or irrational behaviour. By refining the way people speak and think, general semantics aimed to improve human sanity—hence the book's title. Korzybski also believed that scientific disciplines could benefit from greater attention to semantics. Mathematics and physics already operate within tightly defined symbolic systems. Yet even these fields are not immune to semantic confusion when they stray into metaphor or public explanation. A more precise, structurally aware use of language could help prevent errors and clarify communication, especially in fields that deal with abstract or probabilistic phenomena. The influence of *Science and Sanity* extends beyond science. It resonates in fields such as media studies, psychology, and philosophy. Its insistence on the provisional nature of meaning, and the dangers of mistaking linguistic maps for reality, anticipated later concerns in post-structuralism and cognitive science. Yet Korzybski remained committed to the possibility of improvement. He was not a sceptic but a reformer. He believed that by becoming more aware of how language works, people could become less reactive, more reflective, and more responsible. In a world where political rhetoric, advertising, and mass communication increasingly shape collective reality, Korzybski's warning remains relevant. When words are used without care, they can distort public discourse and reinforce systems of misunderstanding. But when language is used with precision and awareness, it becomes a tool for sanity, clarity, and shared understanding.

Distortion of perception

Alfred Korzybski's theory of general semantics begins with a simple observation: humans do not react to the world as it is, but to how they perceive and label it. His work, particularly in 'Science and Sanity' (1933), argues that this labelling process—where words stand in for things—often leads to distortions in thinking, behaviour, and communication. What people take as reality is often an abstract map of experience, not the territory itself. When that map is mistaken for the territory, confusion, misjudgement, and emotional overreaction follow.

General semantics is not a philosophy or formal science. Rather, it is a method for examining how language mediates thought and perception. Its aim is practical: to sharpen awareness of how language influences behaviour. Korzybski believed that many human problems, including emotional imbalance and social conflict, could be traced to confusion in language use. For him, words are not neutral labels—they shape how reality is interpreted. One of the central ideas in general semantics is that language works through abstraction. This process involves filtering raw experience into symbols and categories. But people often forget they are dealing with abstractions and act as if the word is the thing itself. Korzybski described this as 'identification', a mental error where different levels of abstraction are conflated. When someone hears the word 'lemon' and salivates, they are reacting not to an object but to a symbol with deep sensory associations. In more complex situations, such as politics or relationships, this confusion can lead to emotional manipulation, ideological bias, and dysfunctional behaviour. To combat this, Korzybski proposed the practice of 'consciousness of abstracting'. This means remaining aware that what is said or thought about the world is not the world itself. A label, no matter how precise, is still only a name. This awareness helps people avoid jumping to conclusions, misreading situations, or projecting past experiences onto present circumstances. It also encourages more measured and flexible responses, especially in emotionally charged situations. Korzybski introduced several techniques to help people internalise this awareness. One of these is 'indexing'—adding qualifiers to general terms to recognise uniqueness. For instance, instead of saying 'John is lazy', one might say 'John-2020' or 'John-in-math-class' to reflect context. Another is using 'etc'. to acknowledge that no statement can capture the full complexity of a subject. These small changes in language signal a deeper habit of thought: that knowledge is always incomplete and context-dependent. Another key concept in general semantics is the 'semantic reaction'. This refers to the automatic responses people have to certain words or phrases. These reactions are shaped by past experiences, cultural norms, and emotional associations. For example, words like 'freedom' or 'failure' can evoke strong feelings, not because of their actual meaning, but because of what they have come to represent for an individual or group. These responses often bypass critical thinking. Recognising and analysing them is crucial to regaining control over one’s understanding and behaviour. Korzybski also emphasised that language distorts because it is inherently limited. No matter how advanced or refined, language is still an abstraction, a reduction of the rich complexity of lived experience. This is why he famously said, 'The map is not the territory'. The symbols used to represent reality are not reality itself. This insight, simple as it seems, has profound implications for how knowledge is constructed, how decisions are made, and how conflicts emerge. General semantics seeks to train people to resist the lure of fixed meanings. In politics, religion, and everyday life, language often becomes rigid and ceremonial. Words become weapons or shields, detached from direct experience. This encourages dogma, prejudice, and systemic misunderstanding. Korzybski’s approach urges people to slow down, to notice how language frames experience, and to develop habits of flexibility and revision. In a time when media, algorithms, and ideological messaging shape perception on a global scale, Korzybski’s ideas remain urgent. The misuse of language does not merely confuse individual minds—it shapes collective behaviour, deepens division, and fuels conflict. General semantics offers tools to become more conscious, more accurate, and more humane in the way reality is processed and shared.

Limitations of language in science

In his 1933 work 'Science and Sanity', Alfred Korzybski introduced general semantics as a response to the confusion and distortion caused by natural language. In 'Korzybski’s Quest:

A Deeper Look at the Limitations of Natural Language in Science[170]' Gerald Haslam, expands on this point, arguing that Korzybski's critique of everyday language stems from a deeper philosophical concern with how people understand the world. Natural language, he believed, is structurally incapable of representing complex, evolving phenomena without distorting them. His project was not merely linguistic but cognitive: to improve how humans think by changing the tools they use to process reality. Korzybski's concern was that natural languages impose static categories on a world in flux. Language reduces experience to simplified words that do not account for uniqueness, context, or change. Terms like 'tree' or 'man' suggest fixed, universal qualities when the actual entities they describe are constantly shifting. This process of reduction can be useful for communication, but it misleads people into believing that their labels reflect the full truth. Korzybski saw this confusion between word and object as the root of many human errors. He claimed that words are maps—representations, not reality itself. And just as a map cannot contain the full texture of a landscape, a word cannot embody the complexity of an experience. In scientific contexts, this linguistic imprecision becomes especially dangerous. Natural languages lack the structural clarity and flexibility required for accurate scientific modelling. Korzybski believed that even in physics or biology, where precision is valued, scientists still rely on ordinary language to frame their theories. This opens the door to distortion, where abstract models are mistaken for concrete facts. Science demands a language that can account for probability, uncertainty, and multiplicity—features that rigid Aristotelian logic and traditional grammar often suppress. To resolve this problem, Korzybski proposed abandoning Aristotelian logic in favour of what he called a 'non-Aristotelian' system. This system would embrace degrees, relationships, and constant revision rather than binary oppositions and fixed truths. It would encourage awareness of abstraction, helping people recognise that every term is a product of selection and omission. Korzybski called this awareness 'consciousness of abstracting'. It involves a mental shift where one becomes aware of how meaning is constructed, rather than if words correspond directly to facts. Haslam emphasises that Korzybski's aim was not to discard natural language but to supplement it with a more refined method. He encouraged practices such as indexing (e.g., referring to 'dog1', 'dog2', etc.) and dating ('John-2022' vs. 'John-2024') to remind speakers that no concept remains stable across time or context. These techniques slow down the automatic identification that leads people to confuse categories with realities. In Korzybski's view, refining language would lead to more accurate perception and more responsible behaviour. Korzybski's 'map-territory' distinction remains one of his most enduring contributions. He insisted that many social and psychological problems arise when individuals respond to verbal descriptions instead of actual experiences. By mistaking the symbol for the thing, people act on flawed assumptions, reinforcing bias and emotional reactivity. Scientific language, if built with greater care and nuance, could resist this distortion. Haslam points out that general semantics was Korzybski's attempt to offer tools for this resistance—tools not just for scientists but for anyone trying to think clearly in a noisy, abstracted world. Korzybski was not simply a critic of language but an optimist about human potential. He believed that people could train themselves to be more accurate, more grounded, and less misled by linguistic shortcuts. General semantics was his way of enabling that transformation. By making people aware of the limits of their words, he hoped to help them see more of reality—and behave more sanely in response to it. In conclusion, Haslam's account of Korzybski's project reveals its lasting significance. The critique of natural language in science is only the beginning. Korzybski's larger goal was to

[170] Haslam, G. (1970) 'Korzybski's Quest: A Deeper Look at the Limitations of Natural Language in Science', ETC: A Review of General Semantics, 27(1), pp. 38–46.

revolutionise how people relate to reality itself by changing the structure of their communication. His vision remains relevant in a world still governed by abstractions, categories, and distortions.

Circularity of human knowledge

Human knowledge never moves in a straight line. It spirals. It feeds back into itself, shaped by abstraction, language, and inference. At the core of Alfred Korzybski's theory of general semantics is this recognition: humans do not access reality directly. Instead, they move through layers of abstraction, each shaped by language, thought, and perception. The world is filtered through the nervous system, reduced by language, and reorganised in symbols. This filtering process, while necessary, introduces distortion at every stage. Yet it is also the only way humans can navigate reality. Korzybski described how electro-colloidal processes in the nervous system operate on a submicroscopic level. Humans do not perceive these directly. What people recognise as 'objective reality' is already the result of earlier abstractions. These are sensations, feelings, observations—all non-verbal and shaped by previous experiences. As abstraction continues, language enters. This brings labelling, inference, and eventually, speech about speech. At this point, communication is no longer about reality itself, but about previous interpretations of that reality. The further one travels in this cycle, the further one moves from direct experience. Despite this complexity, inferential knowledge often proves more reliable than raw perception. As Korzybski noted, sense data alone are insufficient. Science demands hypothesis, testing, and revision. Older generalisations must be updated considering new discoveries. Inference allows for this kind of progress. But it also deepens the circularity of knowledge. Humans are constantly projecting their highest abstractions onto nature, then reading those projections back as if they were inherent features of the world. They create models, see those models reflected, and conclude that their models are accurate. This cycle makes understanding possible but also limits what can be known. The structure of language contributes to this feedback loop. As Edward Sapir pointed out, humans experience the world in large part through the habits of their linguistic communities. People do not see reality directly. They see what their language allows them to see. This problem becomes more visible when societies become larger and more complex. In small communities, language tends to remain close to lived experience. But in mass societies, language becomes abstract, bureaucratic, and symbolic. Words become further detached from what they describe. The result is discommunication—not merely failed communication, but systemic misunderstanding built into language itself. Lawrence Frank described this shift as a movement from static categories to dynamic processes. Feedback replaces linear cause and effect. Modern science increasingly recognises this. Terms like servomechanism and self-regulating system reflect the same principle: that understanding depends on feedback. This is not just true for machines, but for people. Korzybski extended this idea to his concept of time-binding—the uniquely human capacity to build knowledge across generations. Time-binding is itself a feedback process. Humans inherit language and culture, alter it, and pass it on. But this spiralling transmission also locks them into patterns of abstraction and distortion. They are shaped by the very knowledge they produce. This view demands a new way of understanding humans—not as isolated minds or biological organisms, but as whole beings embedded in linguistic, cultural, and neuro-semantic environments. To change how humans think, they must change how they speak. But this change is not easy. As Alexis Carrel warned, man must remake himself and cannot do so without pain. Language, identity, and thought are interwoven. Altering one requires reshaping the others. It is a recursive process. Arthur Eddington described this cycle poetically. The furthest reach of science, he wrote, returns us to ourselves. When people

investigate the unknown, they see the reflection of the mind that framed the question. Human knowledge is a mirror. What is learnt about the world also reveals something about the knower. As science progresses, it does not simply uncover objective truth—it rediscovers the assumptions and symbols placed into nature to begin with. This is the paradox and the beauty of the human condition. The map is not the territory. The word is not the thing. Yet without these abstractions, knowledge would not be possible. Humans are caught in a loop. But by understanding the loop—its structure, its distortions, its feedback—they can move through it with greater awareness.

The structure of linguistic revolutions

Scientific revolutions do not emerge from orderly progress. They erupt from crises, from a sense that prevailing assumptions no longer explain the world. Thomas Kuhn famously described this process in 'The Structure of Scientific Revolutions', showing how new paradigms arise not through accumulation of facts but through a break with old structures. In 'Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture[171]', Chris Knight applies this concept to the birth of human language and symbolic culture. He argues that the emergence of language was itself a revolutionary break—a cultural rupture, not a slow biological drift. For Knight, the origin of language is not a technical innovation like tool-making. It is a social event, born of resistance and solidarity. Language is a collective act, a shared fiction that binds people together. It allows for deception, abstraction, memory, and projection. But it enables a shared world to exist. This world is not just material—it is symbolic. It contains roles, taboos, promises, and laws. To speak is not just to name but to invoke a whole framework of expectations. Language transforms perception into narrative, biology into culture. Knight emphasises that this symbolic breakthrough was not gradual. It happened in a burst—what he calls a 'human revolution'. Anatomically modern humans existed for thousands of years before they left behind any evidence of symbolic thought. Then, suddenly, in the Upper Paleolithic, cave paintings, burial rites, tools, and social structures appear. This is not evolution by inches. It is revolution—a transformation of how humans relate to each other and the world. And at the core of this revolution is language. This theory challenges traditional evolutionary narratives, especially those rooted in Darwinian gradualism. Language did not evolve the way eyesight or opposable thumbs did. It emerged from a cultural shift, one bound up with ritual, cooperation, and resistance. Knight locates its origin in the collective actions of early women, who used ritualised sexual withdrawal to gain leverage over male aggression. These rituals, grounded in solidarity, became structured through symbolic behaviour. Menstruation, taboo, and myth became the foundation for a shared social order. Language, in this view, did not arise from isolated individuals grunting more efficiently—it was born from the need to coordinate collective action through symbolic means. This revolutionary approach reframes how we think about the relationship between biology and culture. It insists that culture—symbolic behaviour, shared language, ritual order—was not a result of slow biological refinement. Rather, culture initiated the refinement. In this sense, language preceded the modern human mind. The invention of shared symbolic codes changed the way people thought, felt, and lived. It created humans as social, symbolic beings. Just as Kuhn described scientific paradigms as defining the boundaries of what counts as knowledge, linguistic revolutions define what counts as reality. Once a new symbolic system is in place, older modes of thought seem absurd or invisible. This is the power of language—it does not just reflect the world, it creates it. And like scientific paradigms, languages are conservative. They resist change. But anomalies—contradictions,

[171] Knight, C. (1991) Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture, Yale University Press.

unspoken tensions—can accumulate, forcing a breakdown. This, too, leads to linguistic revolutions. Knight's theory also helps explain why anthropology struggles to find consensus. Unlike physics or chemistry, anthropology has no stable paradigm. Its object—human culture—is inherently symbolic, and therefore deeply political. Competing models of kinship, ritual, or social organisation often reflect broader ideological battles. Malinowski's defence of the nuclear family, for instance, was not a neutral observation but a political stance. By contrast, Engels argued that early human society was based on collective solidarity, not patriarchal domination. These are not just competing hypotheses; they are rival narratives about what it means to be human. Knight sides with Engels. He argues that early culture was not built on private property or male authority, but on shared rituals that redistributed power. The nuclear family, in this model, is not the origin of culture but its later distortion. It represents a retreat from collective forms of social organisation. The revolution that created symbolic culture was not just cognitive—it was political, grounded in the redistribution of power among genders and generations. In this sense, the story of human origins is not merely about the past. It is about the present crisis. Capitalist modernity, with its emphasis on competition, ownership, and domination, has obscured the memory of human solidarity. But the symbolic capacity that once allowed people to imagine new forms of life still exists. A new linguistic revolution is possible—one that reclaims speech as a tool of cooperation rather than control. Language began as resistance. It began to turn biology into culture, violence into ritual, hierarchy into shared meaning. If humanity is to face the challenges of ecological collapse, alienation, and inequality, it must once again reinvent its language—and with it, its world.

Global language of discommunication

Alfred Korzybski's theory of general semantics emerged as a response to a growing realisation: language does not merely describe reality—it shapes and distorts it. His concept of semantic distortion emphasised that every word is an abstraction, and every abstraction separates people further from the reality it tries to convey. In his book 'Science and Sanity', Korzybski argued that this is not an accident, but an inherent feature of language. The larger the society, the greater the abstraction. And the greater the abstraction, the more inevitable the disconnection between words and things, people and meaning, thought and reality. In small communities, language often stays grounded in shared experience. Words have roots in daily life, relationships, and place. But as language scales to accommodate larger and more complex societies, it becomes detached. The need to communicate across vast distances, to govern large populations, or to build institutions introduces a form of speech that is increasingly abstract, technical, and depersonalised. This transformation is not just linguistic—it is political and psychological. The more people rely on abstract language, the easier it becomes to shape, control, and manipulate them through words. And the further language drifts from lived experience, the more it becomes a tool for discommunication. Discommunication, in this context, is not simply a failure to understand. It is the creation of systemic misunderstanding—communication that appears coherent but obscures, confuses, or dominates. Korzybski's idea that the 'map is not the territory' illustrates this. Language is a map, a model of reality, not reality itself. But when people begin to act as if their linguistic models are real, they are no longer speaking about the world—they are speaking about their speech. This recursive disconnection becomes more dangerous in a globalised world, where powerful institutions use language to manufacture consensus, erase difference, and dissolve local cultures. Natural language fails under the weight of modern complexity. Global systems require global language—generalised, standardised, and efficient. But such language cannot represent the diversity and richness of local life. It suppresses nuance, emotion, and context. What remains is a vocabulary of

management, optimisation, and governance. In the name of clarity, it removes ambiguity, and with that, much of what makes communication human. The global language of discommunication is now embedded in international law, bureaucratic systems, digital platforms, and media. It uses abstraction to command, statistics to persuade, and technical jargon to exclude. This kind of language does not tolerate smallness—small truths, small groups, or small cultures. It flattens differences to control them. And in doing so, it not only distorts reality but begins to distort society itself. Real communities become untranslatable. Their customs, dialects, and memories are replaced by the vocabulary of progress, development, and regulation. Korzybski believed that such distortions could be overcome through a new kind of awareness—what he called 'consciousness of abstracting'. This meant recognising that every word is a choice, every sentence a selection, every theory a simplification. Language, then, becomes a field of responsibility. But in a system driven by mass communication, economic control, and digital speed, this awareness is increasingly rare. Instead, language becomes a tool for simulation. It creates the illusion of understanding without requiring real encounter. It replaces thinking with repetition, and memory with data. The global spread of discommunication also carries a moral weight. It erodes the foundations of mutual recognition and shared experience. The more people speak in abstractions, the less they can truly hear one another. Language loses its grounding in the body, in the land, in the face of the other. It becomes unmoored. And this unmooring prepares the ground for social fragmentation, loneliness, and cultural homogenisation. In Korzybski's view, this was not inevitable. His work was a warning and a guide. Semantic distortions may be inevitable in language, but they are not beyond our control. The challenge is to create forms of speech that remain close to reality, that protect the integrity of thought, and that serve the needs of communities rather than systems. If this challenge is ignored, the result will not be more understanding, but mass misunderstanding on a global scale—more noise disguised as clarity, more control disguised as communion.

A possibility once is a necessity forever

'If it is possible to misrefer once, then that possibility must be accounted for in the necessity of the system'.

—Saul Kripke, Naming and Necessity[172]

The phrase 'a possibility once is a necessity forever' captures a deep structural insight into language, meaning, and interpretation—one that resonates profoundly with the work of Jacques Derrida and, in a different register, with Saul Kripke. Though neither thinker may have written these exact words, the phrase condenses central tenets of their philosophies. For Derrida, the notion speaks directly to his theory of 'iterability', which posits that any mark or sign must be repeatable to function. But this repeatability—this possibility of recurrence outside of its original context—is also what opens the sign to distortion, misunderstanding, and misuse. In this sense, the capacity for miscommunication is not a failure of language but its very condition. What can happen once—the slip, the drift, the error—is not merely an accident; it becomes structurally inscribed in the system as a permanent possibility, and thus a necessity. In 'Limited Inc.[173]', Derrida shows that every act of communication is haunted by this doubleness: the sign can function because it can be detached from its origin, and therefore it can never be completely pinned to an intention or context. He writes, '...the possibility of the mark being repeated is the condition of its possibility but also of its impossibility'. This formulation reveals how the very

[172] Kripke, S. (1980) Naming and Necessity. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
[173] Derrida, J. (1988) Limited Inc. Translated by S. Weber. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

mechanisms that allow meaning to be transmitted also guarantee its fragility. The moment a sign can mean, it can also mismean. Once the system admits that possibility, it cannot be undone; it becomes a necessary feature of the system itself. This is why, for Derrida, iterability undermines any clean opposition between meaning and non-meaning, communication and miscommunication, success, and failure. A related concern appears in Kripke's 'Naming and Necessity', though with different emphases. Kripke argues against descriptivist theories of reference and develops the idea of rigid designators—names that refer to the same object in all worlds. Yet even here, the possibility of misreference (for instance, using a name incorrectly in a causal-historical chain) reveals essential tensions in how language functions. Misreference is not merely an error to be corrected; it exposes the structure by which naming, identity, and intention are sustained. If misreference is possible once, then the system must accommodate it permanently. The logic is modal: possibility, once admitted, becomes an enduring necessity. Thus, whether in Derrida's exploration of writing, context, and meaning, or Kripke's analysis of naming and reference, the underlying idea remains: the singular occurrence of deviation or failure is never merely episodic. It marks a permanent feature of the system. What happens once is not incidental—it is foundational. The possibility of rupture is not peripheral to language, but constitutive of it. Once the system makes room for even the slightest displacement, it must carry that possibility forward forever. If the dangerous function of language—its capacity for failure, misreference, or deceit—is always structurally possible, then discommunication is not an accident but an inevitable outcome. In a closed linguistic system where every utterance carries the potential for deviation, the process tends not toward clarity, but toward entropy. Miscommunication, distortion, and semantic drift are not exceptions to the rule; they are the rule's logical conclusion. Over time, meaning breaks down—not through external force but through internal accumulation of interpretive noise. This entropic collapse is not merely theoretical; it underlies the planned obsolescence of language itself. As words circulate, they wear out, lose force, and become instruments of manipulation or confusion. The promise of communication becomes its undoing. In this view, the system cannot remain stable. The very features that allow language to function also guarantee its decay. Thus, the obsolescence of meaning is not only foreseeable—it is necessary. When discommunication forms a closed circuit, knowledge chases its own shadow, and truth turns into its opposite. What may mismean once must mismean forever; the crack in the word becomes the shape of the world.

Language alienates from the self

Language, rather than revealing the self, often obscures it. The moment a thought is expressed, it slips away from its origin. Gigla Gonashvili, in his philosophical reflections[174] on Derrida and Artaud, argues that alienation is not merely social or psychological—it is embedded in thought itself. Even Descartes' famous phrase 'I think, therefore I am' is not a declaration of certainty, but the beginning of a rupture. Who is this 'I' that thinks? The self is already fractured, already performing a version of itself shaped by external forces. This alienation, Gonashvili reminds us, has deep historical roots. The word 'alienation' comes from the Latin alius, meaning 'other'. Originally a legal term for the transfer of property, it evolved to signify mental estrangement. By the time of Descartes, it hinted at a disturbance in thought itself. In post-Enlightenment France, alienation became a major theme in both psychiatry and philosophy—especially for thinkers like Marx, who saw the worker estranged from labour, and for Derrida,

[174] Gonashvili, G. (2025) 'Language alienates us from the self: Derrida, Artaud, and the performance of the self', IAI.tv, 28 July. Available at: https://iai.tv/articles/language-alienates-us-from-the-self-auid-3270 (Accessed: 30 July 2025).

who found alienation even in the structures of reason. Derrida's reading of Descartes challenges the idea that the cogito ('I think') excludes madness. It is asserted in full knowledge that madness could dissolve even this certainty. Likewise, his analysis of Antonin Artaud reveals the painful paradox of language: the more urgently we try to express ourselves, the more we feel ourselves disappear. In Artaud's letters and writings, especially in his theatre work, language is not a bridge to the self—it is a battlefield. Words carry the promise of creation but also the wound of division. Artaud speaks of a 'vicious will' that corrodes meaning at its root. Every act of writing is at once an effort to affirm existence and an experience of being torn from it. Artaud's breakdowns, institutionalisations, and linguistic experiments—especially his use of glossolalia and invented, unspeakable words—were not signs of mental collapse but expressions of a struggle to reclaim an authentic self. His neologisms, like 'draorg' or 'ratara', seem meaningless, but they resist the generalising power of conventional speech. These are not mere symbols; they are attempts to assert that 'I am here', even when language fails. His writings suggest that true expression is performative—it must be lived, enacted, even suffered. This idea also touches Derrida's view of language: before one can speak, there is already rupture, otherness, a structure of absence. Our names, genders, and social roles precede us; we are named before we know how to name ourselves. Even the French phrase 'je m'appelle' ('I call myself') hints at the impossibility of true ownership over identity. This symbolic alienation leads to the performance of multiple selves: different voices, masks, and personas that never quite cohere. Today, as artificial intelligence and language models simulate conversation and meaning, this crisis intensifies. All our knowledge is rendered instantly available, yet the origin—the speaking subject—fades. Authentic alienation, Derrida suggests, lies not in despair but in allowing spontaneous thought to surface, however unstable. One response, as Gonashvili notes, is to reclaim expression through personal writing, such as journaling. Even this, though, risks falling into uniformity unless we remember: the self speaks with many tongues. Language alienates us from the self—but it also gestures toward a more complex truth. To live in language is to perform the self, not find it. Yet it is only through this painful process that one might glimpse something genuine. At the end in most cases, 'us' is a linguistic creation because one cannot speak all the time from the name of the others. As a tool for creating this imaginary 'us', the language alienates the speaker from his body and others around. Heidegger said, 'Language is the house of being' yet the official language is more like an apartment block in a ghetto than a house. 'Home is where the family is' reminds us that belonging and closeness to others—not mere walls—make a true home. Language is a construction, family is people. Real home and a decent life arise from simple dialects spoken among kin, not from the sterile exactness of written rules. Love does not need grammar.

Unformulable self

In 'Human Personality'(1943), Simone Weil critiques the modern exaltation of 'personality' and 'rights' as central moral values. She argues that focusing on the 'person'—with its desires, opinions, and linguistic self-construction—distracts from what is sacred in the human being. What is truly sacred, according to Weil, is the impersonal, the anonymous part of the soul that is capable of attention, compassion, and contact with truth. She contends that language reinforces personality by fixing identity and mediating all experience through signs. But language is inherently inadequate; it abstracts and limits thought. As she puts it, even the most rigorous thoughts may be unformulable in words, though they are perfectly clear. The sacred, then, lies outside language, in silence and attention. Weil also critiques the emphasis on legalistic rights and social recognition. These are based on 'personality', and therefore on ego, comparison, and conflict. What is needed instead is a moral vision rooted in compassion for

affliction, attention to others, and obedience to a higher, impersonal good. Her alternative to the cult of personality is a mystical ethics of attention: the capacity to see another's suffering and respond, not through ideology or theory, but through a stripped-down, silent form of presence. At best, a mind confined by language is imprisoned, limited by the number of relations that words can hold together at once. It remains blind to thoughts that lie beyond language—thoughts that are rigorous and clear but unformulable. Trapped within this enclosure, the mind moves in a space of partial truths, never able even to glimpse what lies outside. Within this narrow frame, the modern obsession with 'rights' appears hollow. Rights are sterile; they stir no real impulse to act. Only the word 'obligation' carries the weight of authenticity, speaking to something beyond personal claim. To love another fully is not to assert one's personality, but to ask with genuine attention: 'What are you going through?' The eternal element of the soul is impersonal, defined by pure attention freed from desire. To reach it requires decreation—not destruction, but the undoing of creation, a return from the formed to the formless, where the soul gives up selfhood to make room for truth. Weil's central message is deeply countercultural: that true moral and spiritual life begins when one abandons the ego, suspends language, and directs silent, loving attention toward others and the good. 'Human Personality' is one of her most provocative and unsettling meditations on the limits of language, identity, and moral life. In this essay, she famously argues that the concept of 'personality' is an illusion and even a potential source of evil—not because the human individual is unimportant, but because reducing the soul to a 'person' enclosed in language, rights, and ego distorts its deeper reality. The being, at its deepest, cannot be fully captured in language—it is beyond articulation, residing beyond the reach of words and concepts. The self is unformulable. Only in silence, attention, and the undoing of the ego does this hidden self begin to speak.

'At the very best, a mind enclosed in language is in prison. It is limited to the number of relations which words can make simultaneously present to it; and remains in ignorance of thoughts which involve the combination of a greater number. These thoughts are outside language, they are unformulable, although they are perfectly rigorous and clear and although every one of the relations they involve is capable of precise expression in words. So, the mind moves in a closed space of partial truth, which may be larger or smaller, without ever being able so much as to glance at what is outside'.

–Simone Weil, Human Personality

Closing questions:

1. When language becomes a performance devoid of presence, can speech still carry the weight of reality?

2. If all utterance is shaped by structure, bias, or automation, is there any space left for a truly human voice?

3. Can communication still serve communion, or has it become merely the ritual of coordinated isolation?

4. In a world where connection is constant, but comprehension is absent, is discommunication the hidden cost of visibility?

5. What happens to meaning when even silence has been colonised by systems of response?

6. If discommunication simulates dialogue while deepening disconnection, how does one begin to speak otherwise?

7. When language operates without intention, interpretation, or shared ground, is miscommunication still an error—or a design?

8. How can one resist discommunication without retreating into silence or cynicism?

9. If language now reproduces systems more than it reveals selves, where does speech end and surveillance begin?

10. Is it possible to dismantle the machinery of discommunication using the very language it has emptied?

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